

BECOMING A MULTIETHNIC CHURCH
WHEN THE WORLD COMES TO YOUR DOORSTEP

VOLUME ONE

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BY
JOSEPH PAUL KNIGHT

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To Pam, my loving and patient wife.

Thank you.

To Pam, my loving and patient wife.

Thank you.

It is too small a thing
that You should be My Servant
to raise up the tribes of
Jacob and to restore
the preserved ones of Israel;

I will also make You
a light of the nations
so that My salvation may
reach to the end of the earth.

--Isaiah 49:6 NASB

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through Christian witness in local congregations was the right fit for GRIF's calling. I am thankful for his careful eye and recurring encouragement that have brought tighter precision to the present work.

To God be praised.

ABBREVIATIONS

CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CGM	Church Growth Movement
CL	GRIF CommunityLink
CSF	Critical Success Factors
DHS	Department of Human Services
ELL	English Language Learners
ESL	English as a Second Language
ESV	English Standard Version
GRIF	Grand Rapids International Fellowship
HCSB	Holman Christian Study Bible
HUP	Homogenous Unit Principle
IM	Integrated Model (among multicultural churches)
ISBE	The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
IT	Information Technology
NASB	New American Standard Version
NIV	New International Version
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
NT	New Testament
Q & A	Questions and Answers

ABSTRACT

This thesis provides homogenous congregations located in ethnically diverse settings with a theology and model for cross-cultural outreach and inclusion, especially those surrounded by immigrant communities flourishing with non-Christian religions. It relates the journey of an established white congregation reaching out to its diverse neighbors with Christ's love and bringing them into its fellowship. It describes five phases during those 10 years, each with its respective challenges and breakthroughs. It argues that multiethnic congregations constitute the New Testament ecclesiological norm rather than those formed by the homogenous unit principle because they more fully express the nature of the church and its reconciling gospel and have a missional advantage in bridging to Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim populations who have migrated into their communities.

CHAPTER 1

CENTRAL ISSUE AND THESIS

The central issue of this thesis seizes upon one of the foremost missional opportunities of the North American church in the twenty-first century: How do congregations effectively reach out to Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists who have immigrated into their communities?¹ Stated most succinctly, this thesis contends that the best solution is the multiethnic church (MEC). But how do we get a church that is homogenously populated to genuinely get engaged in this endeavor? Given the natural human tendency to segregate with others who share our own culture, customs, even color, why and by what means does a monocultural congregation close the gap between itself and its diverse community? Overlaying that interethnic challenge is an additional theological layer. Can the essential kerygma of the gospel find intellectual apprehension and personal embrace in the life of the Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim? The standard evangelical response answers in the affirmative. The more pressing question asks how the burden of witness to these groups that has been carried for so long by specialists, theologians, missiologists and missionaries can be shared by rank and file believers. This multi-tiered challenge of reaching across dual borders of ethnicity and religion calls for clear connections between anthropology, soteriology, ecclesiology and missiology.

¹ For a detailed picture of the immigrant population in the USA from a skillful analysis of census data, see Steven A. Camarota, *Immigrants in the United States, 2007: A Profile of America's Foreign-Born Population* (Center for Immigration Studies, November 2007), accessed on February 21, 2010 at <http://www.cis.org/articles/2007/back1007.html>. He writes, "Since 2000, 10.3 million immigrants have arrived – the highest seven-year period of immigration in U.S. history." Missiologist Samuel Escobar underscores "unparalleled opportunities" for missions that have arisen from today's "massive global migration." J. Samuel Escobar, "Mission Fields on the Move," *Christianity Today: The Conversation* (May 2010), accessed May 6, 2010 at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/globalconversation/may2010/index.html>. In a separate case study, Ryan Allen illustrates ways in which religious organizations can assist refugees in forming gateways into American society. Ryan Allen, "The Bonding and Bridging Roles of Religious Institutions for Refugees in a Non-Gateway Context," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 33, No 6 (June 2010): 1049-68. For population distribution of Muslim immigrants and the consequent mutual attitudes between foreigner and host see: The Pew Research Center, *The Great Divide: How Westerners and Muslims View Each Other* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Global Project Attitudes, June 22, 2006).

These junctures need not be feared as ponderous nor cumbersome but inviting intersections with promise to enrich pulpit, classroom and marketplace interaction. If these challenges appear daunting their prospects for missional advancement are riveting. The author believes that this can be the finest hour for monocultural churches in America that sense a call to reach out and include people of both indigenous minorities² and immigrant populations. This complexity of ethnicity and religion calls for a multifaceted set of defensible assertions. First, it will be argued that the MEC represents the ecclesiological New Testament (NT) norm rather than a novelty. Second, the gospel of Jesus Christ supplies what religions uniformly lack. Third, the most effective mode by which that gospel is imparted to people of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim backgrounds are multiethnic Christian communities. Each chapter will advance the central thesis in the following ways.

Chapter 2 launches the central thesis forward by establishing a biblical and theological foundation for the MEC, demonstrating how it arose through divine initiative in love and recounted through the sweep of special revelation through the Word of God.

Chapter 3 steps back momentarily from a discussion of the nature of the church to that of religion. It argues that the religions of the world, viewed from the perspective of redemptive history, can be traced ultimately as a response of fallen human beings to general revelation and human creation. Despite their transcendent source, the author contends that human sinfulness combined with limited revelation place people in urgent

² Early signs of an increasing number of African Americans attending white churches are found in an extensive study of the American church at Duke University. While the most inclusive congregations are Roman Catholic, the study reveals that "perhaps more significantly, congregations themselves are becoming less white. In particular, predominantly white congregations are becoming less white. In the period between 1998 and 2006-07: The percentage of congregations with more than 80% white participation dropped from 72 to 63%." While it is noted that these numbers reflect the impact of immigration, "something more is afoot. The percent of attendees in predominantly white congregations with some African American attendees has also increased, from 60% to 66%." The percentage of white Christians attending black congregations, however, remains unchanged. Shawna Anderson, Jason Byasse, and Mark Chaves (dir.), *American Congregations at the Beginning of the 21st Century* (National Congregations Study, 2009), 6-7. The full report may also be accessed at <http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/>.

need of a gospel witness, one to which the church is entrusted with sole custody.

Chapter 4 leads to the third main assertion. In populations of diverse religious backgrounds and ethnicities, the most viable on-ramp merging those who traverse on alternative routes of general revelation from which religions emerge to the ancient path of special revelation wherein salvation is found is the MEC. The author identifies five specific aspects of missional advantage of the MEC over congregations of ethnic similarity.

Chapter 5 examines the insights of selected published works by MEC proponents, particularly the theological issues which they deem germane to ethnically inclusive congregations. Especially problematic is the philosophical acceptance and widespread practice of the homogenous unit principle (HUP) that was observed by Donald McGavran of the church growth movement and which reigns over much of modern evangelicalism. It will be necessary to evaluate its premises at length.

Chapter 6 makes major headway toward the central thesis by recounting the experiences of an established Midwestern white congregation (with rare exceptions) that transitioned itself as a MEC, reaching out and including both indigenous ethnic minorities as well as international immigrants in obedience to the Great Commission. This ethnographic study will draw from case studies and experiences from which central issues and principles emerged during the period from 1999 to 2010. It will describe five identifiable phases that played out over its first ten years of transition, each one containing its own unique set of goals and challenges that called for decisions and initiatives. Vitally important in this endeavor has been community witness. It will be shown how the in-fleshing of God by the Spirit manifested through acts of compassion and embodied in the multiethnic community has kept widening the boundaries of the gospel's accessibility.

Chapter 7 brings the central thesis to fruition by postulating conclusions drawn

from earlier chapters and formulating their practical applications for church leaders. The author tailors these to the anticipated needs of the intended audience, primarily leaders of monocultural congregations that are located in multiethnic settings, especially those surrounded by immigrant communities burgeoning with non-Christian religions. Many leaders, much like this author ten years ago, may already accept the premise of biblical support for the MEC and the motivation for change. Still they may feel stalled, perhaps long on vision and short on strategy. The author aims that through a combined reading of Chapters 6 and 7 to place into the hands of these men and women a reproducible template to serve as a reliable guide as they begin their own transitional journeys. It is believed that when the gospel is embodied, celebrated and proclaimed through an extraordinary mixture of ordinary people, its point of origin will become gloriously prominent. Both church and community will take note that “this extraordinary power” to be “from God and not from us” (2 Cor 4:7 HCSB).³ That competent source, it is believed, will spawn solid principles and effective strategies that can be contextualized for the unique circumstances of each local ministry context. Congregations, it is hoped, will experience rewarding journeys both in the fruit of their outreach efforts and the ensuing enrichment to their fellowship from the unique contributions that will flow back into the life of the church.

Projects do not emerge in a vacuum and the present one is no exception. Let us first trace the key factors giving rise to this study.

Why Are We Doing This? My Personal Story

This journey began with a pluralist provocation into a comparative religious inquiry resulting in a soteriological discovery. That personal breakthrough, in turn,

³ All Scripture references will use the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) unless cited otherwise.

renewed a missiological obligation but did not end there. This progression starting with a disturbance that evoked a moral compulsion, to this author's surprise, culminated in a dramatic congregational transition into a concrete ecclesiology of ethnic inclusion.

Pluralist Provocation to Soteriological Discovery

Recent American evangelicals have placed paramount importance on reaching "irreligious people" in an attempt to take the gospel beyond church pulpits into broader society to connect with "unchurched Harry and Mary." Largely overlooked in this worthy pursuit, however, have been swelling numbers of devoutly religious people with backgrounds in non-Christian religious traditions. These included unreached Krishna and Laksmi, unchurched Muhammad and Fatima and undetected Trinh and Cuc who now reside next door to Harry and Mary.

For 20 years this pastor served churches in major metropolitan areas—Portland, Oregon, Seattle, Washington and Austin, Texas— cities into which immigrants had flooded. The religious landscape over time took on a significantly different shape since completing seminary in 1977. Hindu and Buddhist temples as well as Islamic mosques now dotted that landscape, becoming more mainstream in American life and raised a religiously pluralistic awareness with significant missional impact. For the rank and file Christian, the major evangelistic question began to shift from "how to?" to "should I?" Should I share Christ with the soft-spoken Hindu family who lives next door, or with the devout Muslim proprietor who owns a café down the street or with the studious Buddhist lab partner at my medical school? Does their current religious devotion place them off-limits for Christian witness? And if we dig beneath the surface of their religious teachings, will we not discover essential agreement among our core truths? This reasoning evolved into a new axiom typically voiced rhetorically, "Aren't we all really saying the same thing?" Requests for evangelistic training tapered, especially among the

teens and young adults, with a corresponding rise in a new set of questions that went deeper than technique. The very idea of evangelistic witness to a religious neighbor caused some to bristle over concerns of casting an image of arrogance or narrow-minded intolerance. The ensuing evangelistic silence stirred up a ruminating conscience. Did Christ not die for all and, thus, all deserve a right of refusal? Will the Lord return with commendations because we avoided arrogance or condemnations for hoarding eternal treasures for our own kind in an evangelistic vein of apartheid? These afflictions of conscience we received as from the Holy Spirit as a matter of justice. E. Michael Jaffarian appears to be on point in this matter: "There are major blocks of people in the world with little or no gospel presence among them... The call to cross-cultural evangelism is a call to address this tragic imbalance that grieves the Spirit of harvest."⁴

Today's religious mix is admittedly bewildering and represents a daunting reality facing evangelistic witness. For many Christians, the nub of this issue shifted from not knowing what to say to not knowing what to believe, less of an evangelistic challenge calling for new tools and more of a theological crisis precipitating collapsing faith. Is the gospel of Christ for some but not others or does it have unvarying universal pertinence? What relevance has evangelistic training if the jury is still out on evangelistic legitimacy?

These provocations led to a pastoral resignation in Texas and the relocation of a family of five to Grand Rapids, Michigan to enroll in post-graduate studies. It began with an admission of ignorance. This pastor had a firm grip on the Christian worldview and gospel message but at best a second-hand knowledge of the major religions. Investigating the merits of pluralism's basic premise of theological parity among religions, it was hoped, would cast light on the wide implications of Christ's unique

⁴ E. Michael Jaffarian, "Paul Tipped the Balance Toward the Frontiers," *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* (April 1996): 165.

claims. What process could yield objective data from which fair conclusions could be drawn? Rather than employing a deductive method starting with a conclusion and looking for support, an inductive approach was called for. The study compared the NT gospel with the foundational teachings of the world's largest religions, Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam, focusing on the earliest hagiography itself and not this or that theological school within a religious tradition.⁵ It selected only one tenet for comparison, the doctrine of hope, because believers are exhorted to present a case for it in society (1 Pet 3:15). Postulations of the afterlife were compared at three junctures: desired object (Moksha, Nirvana, Paradise, Heaven), the path to its realization and finally its basic nature. Christian hope distinguished itself among its counterparts both in the scope of its content and the solid basis for its expectation. Two terms bringing focus to Christian hope are totality and continuity, reaching beyond personal salvation in encompassing the cosmos in its entirety, on the one hand, and, on the other, bringing each aspect of salvation in Christ to its fruition, from seed to full-flower. Its seven objects are these:

Cosmic Hope

1. Kingdom Consummated: Christ's Universal Reign will Vanquish Rival Cosmic Powers (Rom 16:20; 1 Cor 15:24-28; Phil 2:9-11; Col 1:16, 19-20; Heb 2:8; Rev 20:10, 13-14)
2. Cosmos Regenerated: The Creator will Reverse Physical Decay (Rom 8:20-22; cf. Matt 19:28; Acts 3:21; Eph 1:10; 1 Pet 1:3-4; 2 Pet 3:12-13)

Personal Hope

3. Redemption Finished: Resurrection Life will Overcome the Grave (1 Cor 15:22-23, 26, 43, 50-57; cf. Rom 8:23; 1 Cor 6:14; Phil 3:20-21; Rev 21:4)
4. Justification brought to Fruition: Christ's Final Mercy will Shield from Final Wrath (1 Thess 5:9; cf. John 3:16-18; Rom 5:9-10; Jas 3:12-13; Jude 21)

⁵ Joseph P. Knight, "Hope Against Hope: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian Hope" (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2000). For Hinduism the study drew from The Rig Veda, The Thirteen Principal Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita; for Theravada Buddhism (classical) the Buddhist Scriptures, known as the Tripitaka (Three Baskets); and for Islam, the Qur'an (not the Hadith).

5. Sanctification Perfected: The Unveiled Epiphany of Christ will Thoroughly Restore the *Imago Dei* (1 John 3:2-3; cf. John 14:23; Rom 8:9, 14, 16, 29; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 5:5; Rev 22:3-4)
6. Reconciliation Realized: Unprecedented Nearness will Close the Gap in the Divine-Human Relationship Turning Glimpses of Faith into Steady Gaze (John 14:1-3; 1 Thess 4:17; 1 Cor 1:9; 1 John 1:3; Rev 21:3, 7; 22:4)

Societal Hope

7. Reconciliation Manifested: Corporate Praise to the One God by the Redeemed Family of Nations will Mend All Rifts in Society (Rev 7:9; 21:3; cf. 1 Thess 4:16-17; 2:19-20; 5:10)

Christian hope alone promises such comprehensive renovation in which the physical and spiritual universe is restored in its totality, individual believers in their glorified individuality and the redeemed family brought into cordial proximity. No parallel in scope, in kind or in grandeur emerged in the religions under study. The Eastern religions anticipate personal liberation that dissolves individuality through excarnations into final All-ness (Hindu moksha) or extinction into nothingness (Buddhist Nirvana). Islam holds out entry into Paradise, the final oasis of semi-private delights in which old contrabands become new amenities. The tall order promised in Christian hope finds its second dominant feature in the Triune God upon whom it rests⁶ and salvages it from a wishful verb to a confident expectation. Its assurance is clarified in the gospel's answers to three questions:

1. Did God? His Previous Fulfillment of Specific Promises at Christ's First Advent Fortifies His Pledge to Return in Final Glory (Titus 1:2; cf. Gen 3:15; Isa 7:14; 9:1-7; 53:1-12; Mic 5:1-2; Luke 24:25-27, 44-46; Acts 26:6-7; Heb 10:23; 1 Pet 1:10-12, etc.)

⁶ Christian hope anchors itself in the character of God manifested through the historical unfolding of redemption. The Father's loving faithfulness is displayed through the veracity of his word and power to enact his plans (Titus 1:2; 2 Cor 5:17; Eph 1:12; Heb 10:23;). The sinless life and sacrificial death of the Son revealed God's righteous judgment on sin and mercy for sinners (Rom 3:25-26; 5:5-11; 8:32; 1 John 3:1-3), assuring believers with confident anticipation of the approaching Day of Christ (Rom 5:6-11). Proof of his final victory over death (Acts 2:26; 1 Th 4:13-14; 1 Pet 1:3, 21) is found in the resurrection and ascension into glory (Heb 2:10; 12:2). The Holy Spirit engenders and sustains hope in the believer (Rom 15:12-13; Eph 1:14).

2. Can God? His Resurrection Power that Raised One from the Dead Heightens Plausibility that All will be Raised in the Future (1 Cor 15:2-3, 11, 14, 17, 20; cf. Acts 17:31; 1 Thess 4:13-14; 1 Pet 1:3, 21)
3. Will God? His Public Demonstration of Love, Mercy and Grace on the Cross at a Time of Universal Human Defiance Assures His Children that Hope will Not Disappoint in the End when it Counts the Most (Rom 5:1-11; 8:24-25; 2 Cor 5:18-21; Titus 3:3-7; 1 Pet 1:3, 13-19)

Shy yearning for final Liberation (*moksha*) captured Hindu hope and rested largely upon human efforts through the disciplines of sacred duty (*dharma*), special knowledge (*jnana*) or pure devotion (*bhakti*). Similarly, the Theravada Buddhist must tread the eightfold path through many preceding lifecycles. The Qur'an, anticipating a Day of final Judgment while denying both the historical reality and the atoning efficacy of Christ's death, leaves Muslims straining to accrue merits of personal devotion in hopes of winning Allah's final approval on his dreadful Day of Reckoning.

Soteriological Discovery to Missiological Obligation

The author emerged from this study with two profound changes. The first was a surprising new tenderness engendered toward religious neighbors. Their hagiography expressed those yearnings experienced by all of us by virtue of belonging to the human family. They grappled with universal life issues, searching for solutions to such matters of personal guilt, a deity of distance, invisibility or non-existence and a lack of assurance of present or final acceptance (ending cycles of karma and rebirth or escaping Hell). Foreigners became less defined by labels of difference and more human by bringing to light many points of identification, thus evoking deeper empathy than before. These shared longings establish a strong basis for authentic friendship. Second, this pastor's view of the gospel message shifted from personal confidence in it to a renewed obligation to share it in a pluralist milieu. Having evaluated it against its neighboring counterparts on grounds of scriptural revelation rather than subjective loyalty, the

gospel's ascendancy became apparent. Not only is it in a category of its own, it answers the very issues of the heart that are articulated in their hagiography. This combined prominence and wide relevance evoked a more buoyant faith in the content of the gospel message (Rom 1:16) that, in turn, begs to be shared (Rom 1:14). Bold witness humbly shared across religious lines in the power of the Holy Spirit steers clear of ignorant bravado by virtue of the inductive process through which it was derived and eliminates the need to conjure feigned assurance in its provisions. While acknowledging truth and beauty in the religious writings, glaringly absent in them were the provisions found in the Person and work of Christ. Proclamation then becomes both merited and obligatory.⁷

Missiological Obligation to Ecclesiological Quest

The ecclesiological quest of the present thesis project, then, emerges out of soteriological curiosities incited by our increasingly pervasive religious pluralism. Those piqued an investigation into what we called the “cargo” question: Beneath the cultural trappings, is the content of Christian hope fundamentally unique, universally pertinent and thus an exportable commodity? Or is it only a universal kernel shared by all religions that is wrapped in the unique local husk of its first-century Middle Eastern origins? Evangelicals confess Jesus as Lord and join the apostolic witness that “there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12 NASB). Inductive examination into alternate “cargoes” not only reinforced this witness but raised the “track” question. By what means can this cargo of hope be transported to our Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim neighbors for whom it has been

⁷ That the gospel is widely fathomable and applicable to the human condition across the span of human cultures has been confirmed to the author by the presentation of this material to audiences in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Singapore, India and Africa as well as the West.

provided? The central issue of the present work embarks on a journey with its beginning where the first investigation ended. It began with a painful admission that we were wrong on the second question. Still learning, our thesis contends that in a milieu of burgeoning religious pluralism and ethnic diversity, the gospel message finds its most compelling voice not merely through winsome proclamation but by vivid incarnation. That is, cogent persuasion comes first through a diverse community created by the Spirit from all four corners of the world, and one calling for a concrete NT ethnically inclusive ecclesiology.

CHAPTER 2

THE MULTIETHNIC CHURCH, INEXTRICABLY EMBEDDED IN THE PROGRESSIVE PATH OF SPECIAL REVELATION, IS THE ECCLESIOLOGICAL NORM

Ten years ago we wondered if, by taking a deliberate leap from a monocultural to a multiracial church, we might simply be erecting an ecclesiological monument to a secular value, today's latest trend of multiculturalism. Are we in step with the advancing reign of God or jumping on a bandwagon? If we are reforming the church to suit our current climate, will we then abandon our project if that climate changes? These questions forced a careful examination of its biblical and theological roots which led to the position of this chapter. That is, the MEC is the New Testament standard because it finds itself inextricably embedded in the progressive revelation of biblical redemption. Rather than a vogue expression of the current culture, or even a contrived New Testament (NT) innovation, it represents an ecclesiology rooted deeply in the Hebrew prophets and reaches back even further through the patriarchs to the creation of humanity.

Two caveats are in order. First, does this claim impose a one-size-fits-all view of the local church? The One drawing human beings to himself is hardly confined to a single model of the church, so this is not to deny the value of monoethnic congregations through which many have been brought to Christ. However, the author is arguing that they stop short of expressing the full nature of the church. An archipelago of ethnic Christian congregations in an ocean of coexisting cultures says precious little about the reconciling power in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Second, advocating the MEC as the norm refers to its pursuit as a desired goal to which all churches should be heading. In most places a homogenously composed

congregation or church plant is a legitimate starting place. We must allow for process.¹ However, that journey from homogeneity to heterogeneity requires purposeful application of Scriptural ecclesiological realities rather than letting it “just happen.”²

Grand Rapids International Fellowship (GRIF), like most evangelical churches, needed no persuading of God's universal love for all humanity or of the missional obligation throughout the world which that belief entailed. What we had to discover was how God calls the range of peoples not only to himself, but into a community that captures his very nature. Many of us were kingdom individualists in need of a fuller conversion.

It will be demonstrated that the MEC and the religions of the world both arise from divine revelation but through different channels. A brief description of these is in order. Revelation, understood as “the disclosure of what was previously unknown,”³ leads logically to conclude that without it, Deity, veiled in inaccessible and undetectable transcendence (Isa 55:9, 57:15; Rom 11:33-34; 1 Tim 6:15, etc.), becomes a highly speculative quest reducing theology to an exercise in presumption.⁴ In broad terms, Scripture reveals two modes by which God reveals his character, actions, and will for human beings: general and special revelation. Carl Henry distinguishes these: “The essentials of the biblical view are that the Logos is the divine agent in all revelation, this revelation being further discriminated as *general* or universal (that is, revelation in nature, history and conscience) and *special* or particular (that is, redemptive revelation

¹ The advancing movement predicted by Jesus implied geographic stages: “repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem...” (Luke 24:47 TNIV).

² Chapter 6 will address the process by which a monocultural church transitioned into an MEC. The present chapter posits it as the biblical standard and a congregational goal worth striving for.

³ *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, s.v. “Revelation, Special,” by Carl H. Henry.

⁴ For an in-depth overview of the various modes of revelation by theologians, particularly in the twentieth century, see Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, 1996). He summarizes five broad categories in 27-28.

conveyed by wondrous acts and words).”⁵

Part 1 will contend that special revelation produces the MEC and Part 2 makes a case that religions of the world spring from general revelation combined with other stimuli. These channels of divine disclosure will be depicted through the motif of highways or paths. The one God of revelation has an overarching plan from beginning to end. Long journeys spanning extended stretches of space and time require periodic signposts. To prevent us from losing our way, critical landmarks of divine intervention will point to its preparatory and culminating stages. Each will contribute an essential element to the ultimate shape of the MEC. Let us now begin.

Landmark 1: Human Creation – *Imago Dei*

What is man, that Thou art mindful of him?
– Psalm 8:4 KJV

Man is a living oxymoron: wretched greatness,
great wretchedness, rational animal, mortal spirit, thinking reed.
— Pascal

Does the biblical view of human beings and their respective cultures uphold or undermine the multiethnic congregation (MEC)? From a pastoral perspective, five anthropological issues seem to be germane to this question. Of foremost importance is the matter of equality. Do the Scriptures advance ethnic equivalence or do they uphold one group as normative and ideal for the rest to emulate? Mutual acceptance between individuals across ethnic lines is presumed possible only if an equivalence view prevails. Second, how similar are we? Given the obvious differences existing between the

⁵ Henry, s.v. “Revelation,” *Dictionary of Theology*. Henry importantly places the origin of both modes of God’s self-disclosure with the same God. This is significant in that what is sometimes called “natural” revelation bifurcates the mode from the source. For our understanding of God does not come from nature but through it by its Creator. See John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (ed.), *No Other gods Before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 28.

spectrum of cultures and continents, are there human universals, a floor of commonality that makes meaningful cross-cultural comprehension and authentic community attainable? Do all people in all parts of the world grapple with the same fundamental issues? The third looks at the question of ethnic identity and trans-ethnic belonging. In a MEC, to what degree should separate sub-grouping with one's "own kind" be considered valid and healthy and at what point does it threaten to hinder growth of the greater good by reinforcing provincial thinking? Some people seem culture-locked, both white and non-white, forming parallel societies without any genuine interaction with those outside of their own tight-knit communities. Is that a problem? Four concerns itself with interethnic harmony within the church body. In the face of interethnic misunderstanding or controversy, is there a theologically-shaped vocabulary of race that truly enlightens, promotes honest dialogue, adjusts faulty thinking, increases mutual empathy, fosters goodwill and hastens resolution? Five, what does it mean to integrate multiple cultures and ethnicities into a dynamic community in a way that retains the concrete distinguishing contributions from each ethnic piece to the benefit of the larger mosaic?

Samuel Escobar understood how easily anthropological assumptions get overlooked when he wrote that "mission needs a continual recovery of the biblical view of people."⁶ What is true of mission is also true of the church. In this landmark event this author aims to demonstrate how Scriptures portray human origins that prepare the way for the MEC.

⁶ Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 157.

Anthropological Building Blocks for the MEC

Specifically, a holistic anthropology consisting of four building blocks in the biblical account of human origins contributes to the MEC.⁷

General Revelation – Humanity Placed in a Diverse World Designed for Flourishing

Creational diversity is neither a problem to be solved nor an ideal to be deified but a gift to be gratefully celebrated in the unified worship of God. Both in its physical and cosmic dimensions, diversification points beyond itself to the creative word (Gen 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26) of the one God in three Persons: Father (Ps 33:6-7; Heb 1:1-2), Son (John 1:3-5, 10; Col 1:16; Heb 1:1-2) and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2; Ps 104:30). He holds it together (Col 1:17) and, despite being subjected to the fissures of sin (Rom 8:19-20), promises to reunite all things in Christ (Rom 8:21; Eph 1:10). The opening pages of Genesis introduce us to a creation that is ontologically good (Gen 1:12, 18, 21, 25, esp 31), aesthetically pleasant (Gen 2:9), individually distinguished (Gen 1:7, 9-13, 16, 21, 24; 2:1, 9) and relationally compatible (Gen 2:18, 23-25; 3:8a), a concord that was morally contingent (Gen 2:16-17). This world comes into existence by the creative word of a God who remains distinct from yet imminent to all he has made (Gen 3:8). It was a picture of shalom, a Hebrew idea suggesting more than the absence of war or personal conflict. It refers to widespread wholeness and health:

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Old Testament prophets call *shalom*. We call it peace, but it means far more than mere peace of mind or cease-fire among enemies. In the Bible shalom means universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight – a rich state of

⁷ In a comprehensive study explores relationships between anthropology and mission, Louis J. Luzbetak distinguishes physical anthropological studies of human beings as "biological organisms" that focus upon what is genetically inherited from "cultural anthropology" as "human behavior that is learned." Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988). 26-27.

affairs that inspires joyful wonder as its Creator and Savior opens doors and welcomes the creatures in whom he delights.⁸

Genesis 1 presents a hymn of creation to the praise of a Creator whose attributes of goodness and power were made manifest through all his handiwork.

Intrinsic Human Value Conferred through Imago Dei

The second building block is the intrinsic value conferred through the *imago Dei* upon every human being. People individually and collectively share in a transcendent relationship that is unique and enduring. On the sixth creative day God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; ... God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him, male and female He created them... (Gen 1:26-27 NASB)." Adam derived his name from the ground from which he came (Gen 2:7).⁹ In the absence of human father he stands outside of ethnicity and as the only human being co-designated with Christ as "the son of God." (Gen 2:7), that is, entering the world with a divine ancestry, he becomes a significant figure for later NT soteriology (Rom 5:14). Presented in the biblical narrative as the first man, he represents a new classification within creation. He was "a single human being ... humankind, mankind, a class of being created by God without regard to sex, with a focus as a class of creature, distinct from animals, plants, or even spiritual beings (Gen 1:26)."¹⁰ Starting a class all his own, his personal fate would directly affect all others. God's first action on behalf of

⁸ Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., "Educating for Shalom," *Calvin College*, undated, 1.

⁹ *ho anthropos* (LXX). "The Hebrew for man ('ādām, whence "Adam," 2:20) is related to the word for ground ('ādāmāh; cf. 3:17)." Charles A. Briggs, Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Richard Whitaker, *The Abridged Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew-English Lexicon of the Old Testament : From A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oak Harbor WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, c1906).

¹⁰ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*, electronic ed., HGK132 (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997).

his image bearers was to “bless”¹¹ them and their progeny that they might fulfill his command to “be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth...” (Gen 1:28 NASB).

This biblical portrayal stands guard over individuals and provides the basis for human rights.¹² The image of God is upon all in the human classification, conferring value regardless of any other designation. Seth, born outside the gates of Eden, nevertheless retains the “likeness of God” (Gen 5:1-2 NASB) while simultaneously shaped by the fallen condition of his father (Gen 5:3). Not even the tragic alienation described in Genesis 3 erases the *imago Dei* from humanity. This immutable transcendence, however marred and disfigured, issues in explicit divine protections of the human species so that the unlawful removal of human life from the earth is explicitly forbidden (Gen 9:6; Exod 20:13) and copiously populating it expressly enjoined (Gen 9:6).

Ethnic Subgroups Reflect the Rich Diversity of Creation and its Creator

Adam’s race contains multiplied numbers of family units which further subdivide into clans and tribes. Genesis 9 and 10 provide crucial insights into the biblical view of ethnicity that directly impinge upon the MEC. Is ethnicity a problem to be solved? Does the text indicate or suggest whether this multicultural world of societies is to be appraised negatively or positively?

¹¹ The term “blessing” denotes “vitality, creativity and fulfillment. The whole of the ongoing life of creation is the outworking of God’s blessing. The whole of creation is now caught up into the divine blessing – there is an exuberance, a delight, in creation.” David Atkinson, J. A. Motyer and John R. W. Stott, eds., *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Genesis 1-11* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 42.

¹² Charles R. Taber, “In the Image of God: The Gospel and Human Rights,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 2002): 98. He claims “the Hebrew Scriptures provide the first and most fundamental truth to undergird the concept of human rights: that human beings, male and female, are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore have an inalienable dignity and uniqueness (Gen 1:26–30; Ps 8:4–8).” Citing Kathleen MacArthur, he adds that human creation in God’s image is “the religious basis for human rights. It is difficult to see how any other basis can possibly support or give meaning to the rights claimed on behalf of humanity.” Kathleen MacArthur quoted by Taber, *International Bulletin*, 102.

Divine intention. First, the rise of nations, cultures, tribes and clans suggests an original intention rather than a subsequent departure from a monocultural ideal. This spreading global presence finds validation by compliance to divine mandate. After the earth had been destroyed through the flood, a new beginning for humanity commenced as Noah's three sons received the identical command that had been issued to Adam and Eve to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth" (Gen 9:1; cf. 1:28). The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 reflects compliance by these brothers, tracing their respective genealogies without a hint of censure. The placement of the Table of Nations in the narrative reinforces this positive appraisal. The text introduces the family of nations with distinct languages and cultures in Genesis 10:5, 20 and 31, that is, prior to and not consequent of God's judgment against the Tower of Babel project. This trio of verses summarizes the populations of the three family lines of Noah's sons in a near verbatim pattern: "peoples spread in their own lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations" (Gen 10:5 ESV). We would expect to find the international roster described in chapter 10 to follow the failed project in chapter 11.¹³ After considering various theories explaining this "striking reversal of expected sequence," Hamilton

¹³ Several exegetical resolutions have been offered to solve an apparent contradiction between Genesis 11:1 explicitly stating that the whole world had "one language" and three references in the preceding chapter to the prior existence of multiple languages (10:10:5, 20 and 31). It has been explained as a "topical sequence" rather than a "strictly chronological sequence." Manfred T. Branch, F. F. Bruce, Peter H. Davids, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 118. Victor Hamilton, however, sees here a "case of deliberate dischronologization" and differentiates "one speech" (local language of each nation) from "one language." He draws from C. H. Gordon: "When we read in Gen. XI that all the Earth had one language (*sapa ehaʿ*) after the Flood, the meaning is that while the component ethnic elements of the International Order had their speech for family and ethnic communication, there was an international lingua franca that made communication possible so that great projects like the Tower of Babel could be constructed. God broke up the arrogant Order in Babylonia ... by confounding the lingua franca. International projects require mutual understanding... Gen. XI reflects the break-up of the old Order as following the end of Babylonian as the lingua franca." C. H. Gordon, "Ebla as Background for the Old Testament," *Congress Volume: Jerusalem*, VTSup 40 (1986; Leiden: Brill, 1988), 295; quoted in Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 350-51. What is clear to the present writer is that divine judgment brought an immediate end to the world's common language. To conjecture a second miracle was enacted by the instant creation of world languages is rendered unnecessary by the text in its canonical sequence. The sudden removal of a common language forced the builders at Shinar to resort to their mother tongues which, in turn, coerced their evacuation from Shinar and return to their mother countries according to God's original design.

asserts the following:

A more promising explanation for such dischronologization focuses on the themes of grace and judgment in Gen. 1-11. If Gen. 10 had followed 11:1-9, then obviously the Table of Nations could be interpreted only negatively. The Noahites, filled to the brim with ego, were forcibly scattered throughout the earth. The significance of its present position, however, is the Table fills out and fulfills the divine promise and imperative in 9:1, "be abundantly fruitful."¹⁴

The significance for the world at large and, later, the MEC, is how each subgroup receives unqualified legitimacy. Should the biblical canon later reverse this ongoing ethnic proliferation, it could suggest some kind of historic lapse from an original monocultural ideal. The biblical record, however, tells just the opposite. Rather than a deviant diversity awaiting future retraction, ethnic designations indelibly identify each person's particular place of belonging within the larger human family in the present life¹⁵ and, as we shall see, will be carried on into the next as well.

Ethnic Equality. Second, within that vast ethnic constellation we find equality and differentiation without stratification. The Table validates every ethnic family and tribal unit within the whole.¹⁶ Genesis 1 – 11 hints of no sliding scale or ranking system among separate nationalities. Completely absent is the existence of a "master race" or any single ethnic group to whom is endowed superior traits and thus considered fit to rule the world. Scripturally speaking, the only master race is the human race whose dominion is limited to the subhuman world (Gen 1:26-28). As noted by many authors, Paul may

¹⁴ Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 347.

¹⁵ Anthropologist Darrell L. Whiteman underscores ethnicity as a reflection of God's creation. In clarifying issues of race he captures the challenge: "to understand how we can celebrate cultural diversity as an expression of God's creation in the body of Christ, without that diversity degenerating into ethnic rivalries within...our churches." Darrell L. Whiteman, "The Role of Ethnicity and Culture in Shaping Western Mission Agency Identity," *Missiology* 34, No 1 (Ja, 2006): 59-70.

¹⁶ For an analysis of biblical terms describing people groups within "humanity in all of its subdivisions," see Alan Johnson, "Analyzing the Frontier Mission Movement and Unreached People Group Thinking. Part 1: The Frontier Mission Movement's Understanding of the Modern Mission Era," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 18:2 (Summer, 2001): 84.

have had Genesis 10 in mind when he preached to the Athenians.¹⁷

Distributive Providence. Third, networks of human kinship reflect the providential care of a loving Creator on behalf of all individuals. For God sets the lonely in families for their well-being: “Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in” (Ps 68:6).¹⁸ Family units are built into the fabric of all societies from the dawn of creation (Gen 2:24-25; Heb 13:4). Adam’s race sectioned into smaller units like an ever-spreading honeycomb, permits rapid population growth without threatening individual protections. Partitions of kinship thus fulfill God’s command to fill the earth with his image bearers while demarcating into innumerable units of familial nurture. These spheres of belonging express God’s lovingkindness, a characteristic that inspired David to worship, “O LORD, You preserve man and beast. How precious is your lovingkindness, O God! And the children of men take refuge in the shadow of Your wings” (Ps 36:6-7 NASB). Primary care rests with families as an obligation that is not to be surrendered to the larger whole. The sanctioning of a disproportionate interest in the wellbeing of one’s own kindred follows from this divine providence as a protective device.¹⁹ A notable example is Paul’s

¹⁷ “From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him...” (Acts 17:26-27).

¹⁸ God’s providential care reaches beyond Israel across all his works (Ps 145:9). The family played a protective role and large families were encouraged in Israel for economic, religious and social reasons. “The solidarity of a large family was maintained around the father figure.” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1982), s.v. “Family” by L. Hunt. For divine providence in general, see Ps 136:25-26; 147:7-9; Matt 6:26. The family unit inculcates and regulates human values, see 1 Tm 3:4-5, 12; Ps 101:7. Cornelius is one such example (Acts 10:1-2). Households become receptacles of salvation as in the case of Lydia (Acts 16:14-15) a jailer (Acts 16:31-32) and an official of a synagogue (Acts 18:8).

¹⁹ In a superb essay comparing ancient with modern views of ethnicity, Charles H. Cosgrove writes, “Josephus uses the mouth of Jacob to express the common view that ἐρως πατριδος—love of one’s own people and homeland—is natural in a positive sense (for Jews like Josephus, it is “God-implanted”). We find the same view in Philo, expressed in very similar phraseology. Defending the interests of Alexandrian Jews in his letter to Emperor Caligula, Philo says that there is “implanted” (ἐμπεφυκεν) in all people “a passionate love of their native identity (ἐρως...της πατριδος) and a high esteem for their own laws” (*Legat. II*)... Both are talking about affection for one’s own native identity, including, we can assume, all those things that give one’s πατρία a particular cultural stamp ... Josephus and Philo are not invoking Jewish superiority or advancing Jewish nationalism; they are talking about a feeling common to all humanity, a love of one’s own

“unceasing anguish” over the rejection of salvation by “my kinsmen according to the flesh” (Rom 9:2-3 ESV).

The sum greater than its parts. Fourth, family clusters to which individuals belong are not set in tension with humanity as a whole. While each ethnic subgroup receives unquestionable validation and permanence, it, nevertheless, receives only secondary importance as one part of greater humanity. The Table of Nations presents a unified world of seventy nations, “a numerical symbol of fullness and wholeness. God’s blessing covers the whole earth.”²⁰ This Table, unique in the ancient world,²¹ conveys two theological messages. First, it points to “one world governed by one God,”²² summarized in Genesis 11:1 as “all the earth” and represents “...the ecumene, that is, a group of peoples that are so interlocked by give-and-take that they constitute one world civilization...Internationalism precedes nationalism and provincialism.”²³

The ever-expanding range of sub-groups within it detracts nothing from this solidarity. It provides the human family with a basis of respect, reciprocity and delight across all subgroups. It affirms that “all of humanity, despite geographical and linguistic differences, shares a common origin. In this is humankind’s nobility and inherent value.”²⁴ The *imago Dei*, without erasing lesser semblances and provincial loyalties,

people implanted by God in every person.” Charles H. Cosgrove, “Did Paul Value Ethnicity?,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, No 2 (April 2006): 282.

²⁰ Hunt, s.v. “Family,” *ISBE*.

²¹ Victor Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 346.

²² “... One can make a claim for universal human rights on the transcendent ground that human beings—every human being, all human beings—are created in the image and likeness of God and therefore possess an inalienable and innate dignity that no one can rightly take away on any pretext whatever.” Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 346.

²³ Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 332.

²⁴ “This family tree tells us that God’s blessing to Noah means in reality God’s blessing on the whole of subsequent human history. All human people, even of different national and cultural identities – as chapter 10 itself accepts – are of the same origin, have the same dignity, and belong to the same world. This undercuts all human divisiveness based on nationality, culture and race. However good, however rich

simply overrides them. Salvation will celebrate this intercontinental assembly as part of divine creation.

In summary, a positive view of ethnicity as a reflection of God's rich diversity emerges from the opening pages of Scripture. It expresses God's original plan, his creative differentiation without stratification, providential care distributed throughout human existence and subservient to the greater whole of humanity that shares the greatest likeness in the *imago Dei*. Despite these anthropological realities, Escobar's plea for a "continual recovery of the biblical view of people" remains incomplete. A crucial element for our understanding of mission remains missing, one that threatens human community within Adam's family: universal human alienation.

Original Sin, Self-Worship, Spread Universally through the Imago Adam

The multiethnic church must have a biblical understanding of the root cause fueling cross-cultural conflict beneath the myriad of secondary causes. How did Adam's race veer from its original heights that were provided through general revelation? The Biblical answer to Rodney King's oft-repeated question amid the 1991 Los Angeles race riots, "Why can't we all just get along?" can be traced all the way back to an ancient fundamental disruption within the human family. As such, it is less a question of the nineties but of the ages. What has happened to Paradise that has assaulted shalom at every conceivable level? More specific to the present study is what has occurred to impose spiritual distance to God, create social conflict and cloud the intended effects of general revelation. First, something interfered and severed the natural turning to God, the interpersonal dynamic in which God's image bearers turned to him in trustful delight. What caused them to turn aside from him as image makers of idolatrous defiance? And

national and cultural diversity can be, it should never be allowed to cloud the more fundamental fact that all human people share the same nature, breathe the same air, live on the same earth, and owe their life to the same God." Hamilton, *Genesis 1-17*, 332.

second, what assaulted the shalom and contributes to social strife, interethnic and cross-cultural conflict. Answers to these questions, so necessary for the MEC, is provided through Biblical revelation.

Societal breakdown such as this brutality against Rodney King, Scripture shows, was not always the case but erupted historically upon the tragic fall of Adam from the One whose image he bore. Having been made to know, love and serve God, guaranteeing perpetual shalom from that intimate bond, he was, nevertheless, wonderfully designed to be more than an automaton. As a moral agent, God endowed him with a capacity to choose him and flourish or to disobey him and forfeit that concord. Genesis 1-3 reveals the source of eternal life as life in union with God (Gen 2:7). Forewarning him through divine command with unmistakable clarity, God provides Adam with generous freedom and thin restriction (Gen 2:16-17). All the delicacies in the luxuriant garden were given for him to enjoy save one of a different kind, the “tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” Planting this tree in the middle of the garden rather than on its periphery along with the “tree of life” (Gen 2:9) reinforced the centrality of the command as well the prospects of its violation, striking the root of life’s vitality. Transgression would reap disruption and impose devastating results for the future of Adam’s race, for “in the day that you eat from it, you will surely die” (Gen 2:16 NASB).

What unfolds in this pristine setting of trustful cordiality will not only inaugurate a new epoch in human civilization but, more fundamentally, a new man. Of interest to this author is the effect of these events upon Adam in his special proximity and likeness to God and the nature of his relation to the one whose image he bore. Adam traded what he had – direct communion by virtue of nearness, unquestioned trustful reliance resulting from an environment of magnificent beauty and provision (as well as interest in providing the ambiance of the Creator’s, eternal life infused by God’s very breath (*rauch*, spirit) (Gen 2:7) and in the presence of his Creator as well as unimaginable

sense of purpose as God's vice regent on earth (Gen 1:28) – for even more. Believing a lie that he could become more, even co-equal with God, diminished what God had created him to be (Gen 3:4, 6). Sin as biblically taught has multiple dimensions. At the heart of its debut that emerged at the center of the garden, however, is a fundamental shift from belief in God's word and character to that of an undermining masquerade: "God knows...you will be like God" (Gen 3:5; cf. John 8:44; 2 Cor 11:14), revealing this transgression to be a idolatry of the self rather than a secondary triviality. Seen in this way, sin renders what is less than supreme to the place of supremacy reserved exclusively for God. As a substitute for God it will attach ultimate value to numberless lesser things. Idolatry is love turned inward. Though physical death came later, Adam felt the inner chord of his vitality that had been sourced intimately in God snap with a conscience rising up abruptly in its place.

In Genesis 3, sin assaults the prevailing shalom by imposing death as a tragic new norm onto the created order. This mortality, alien to Eden, issues in a sociological rupture as much as a physical cessation, a reality on which Adam would have ample time (Gen 5:5) to reflect: "Death speaks of change: from the blessing, freedom, vitality and fellowship of the Garden, to curse, bondage, toil and alienation outside the gate on the East of the Garden, with our way back barred by cherubim and a flaming sword."²⁵ His ambition expressed itself in a fatal violation of God's commandments, setting the stage for a family tree of greatness and wretchedness. He marred that image and thus disrupted the entire "class" so that humanity became more complex and compromised. As the trunk grows into branches of multiplied ethnic identities, the hybrid condition of Adam remains unchanged. Separation from God left humanity reeling with a desperation that would accompany his future. His thoughts would be tainted with evil (Gen 6:5), his

²⁵ Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 97.

ideals compromised and their attainment elusive, his relationships manipulative, his cross-cultural interaction shaded by ethnocentric bias leading to conflict and often physical violence (Gen 6:11).²⁶

How does this new estrangement effect the society of nations as recorded in Genesis 3-11? Fearful and unbelieving, the nations defy God's mandate to spread the population (Gen 1:28; 9:1) by embarking on a collective human project of protective consolidation. This enterprise took the form of a tower of unprecedented enormity that constituted an "architectural symbol of humankind's asserted greatness."²⁷ God interfered by confusing the languages so that, in Helmut Thielecke's words, "the lovely plan for a 'collective humanity' falls apart."²⁸ The very project envisioned to be the first utopian dream does indeed make a name for itself, the infamous Tower of Babel.²⁹ This disaster was more than architectural, but undermined the world ecumene, providing:

...a sad description of the fracture of community, of a breakdown of fellowship, of a failure in communication, of a growth in isolation and confusion. It all results from a communal failure to live in dependence on God, and insistence on striving to reach the heavens, and from giving way instead to pride in human achievements and power, and from human beings' determination to be the source of their own security³⁰

Left to its own devices, then, the human family is trapped in a futile existence of "wretched greatness" that is destined for personal and collective isolation, alienation and interethnic conflict.

²⁶ "It is the estrangement which is now enacted between human beings and their Creator which is at the basis of the other estrangements...The people who hide behind the trees for cover from God's searching and questioning voice, experience disruption within their own personal selves. There is a disruption in their relationships with one another...There is no place to turn which is not now in some way estranged from God, which does now need to hear the word of rescue and regeneration and the chance to begin again.", Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 93.

²⁷ Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 178.

²⁸ Thielecke, *I Believe*, 229.

²⁹ Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 178.

³⁰ Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 177.

Racial Definitions Guiding the MEC

Constructive discussions about race in both the church and society will be helped if the terminology employed reflects these biblical anthropological realities. Clear vocabulary of race promotes understanding, mutual respect and genuine empathy in a way that fosters interethnic community. These biblical building blocks should inform and bring shape to our terms when discussing race.

Race

The Scriptures articulate racial differences in a way that underscores rather than undermines equality among subgroups. Biblically speaking, race encompasses humanity as a whole, a single classification based upon shared origins in God by virtue of creation through a common ancestor in Adam. Norman Peart observes that “the biblical issue is not racial divisions, as we in contemporary America define race, but ethnic divisions” since all people come from common human ancestry and face similar spiritual conditions.

The Greek word translated *race* (*genos*) in the NT is used to denote a person's descendants (Acts. 4:6), a person's family (Acts 7:13), and peoples or nationalities (Mark 7:26). Therefore, the word race in the Bible may refer to the origin, lineage, or unity of humanity in that all people are members of the human race (Acts 17:28-29). This common membership means that all people find their origin and source of life in God, they all come from the same original parents (Adam and Eve—Acts 17:26), and they are all contaminated by the same disease (sin—Rom 3:23 that ultimately results in death, Rom 5:12), and they all have the same need (a relationships with Jesus Christ that can remove the penalties of sin—Rom 6:23).³¹

Its solidarity is underscored in the biblical portrayal of Adam as free of ethnicity, the son of God (Luke 4), “humanity without differentiation,”³² “first” and, despite his historical

³¹ Norman Anthony Peart, *Separate No More: Understanding and Developing Racial Reconciliation in Your Church*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 96.

³² K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 426.

individuality, representative humanity.³³ Anthropologist Charles Kraft in his classic study, *Christianity in Culture*, supports this view. He writes, “Beneath the vast array of differences between the peoples of the world lies an equally impressive substratum of basic human similarity. The Scriptures and the behavioral sciences assume this similarity.”³⁴ This floor of human commonality counters nineteenth-century theories that continue to shape modern views of race pitting cultural distinctions against this universal similarity.³⁵ Kraft identifies four common characteristics marking human beings universally. These include biology in which “human beings are so similar biologically that even the attempt to classify human populations on the basis of race has been widely abandoned by knowledgeable scholars.”³⁶ Second, people are the same psychologically in the sense of sharing the basic needs for “meaning in life,” freedom from the “threat of psychological crippling...safety...love and belonging...and esteem.” Of special significance to the church, human beings also share a set of common spiritual characteristics.” These include “such facts as the universality of religion and the universality of sin...The essence of the gospel and its appeal to human beings of every society are rooted in the spiritual commonality of humanity.”³⁷ Fourth, wide similarity is

³³ A comprehensive list of behavioral universals noted by ethnographers was compiled in 1989 by Donald E. Brown. The “Donald E. Brown List of Human Universals” can be found in the entry “Human Universals” in Frank Kiel and Robert A. Wilson, eds., *The MIT Encyclopedia of the Cognitive Sciences* (Cambridge, MASS: The MIT Press, 1999). Quoted in Pinker, *Blank Slate*, Appendix.

³⁴ Charles H. Kraft, *Christianity in Culture: A Study in Biblical Theologizing in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 2d ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979, 2005), 65.

³⁵ “Assumptions of cultural relativity shape our idea of ethnicity, leading us to think of each ethnic group as having a unique cultural identity with its own integrated pattern, such that no ethnicity can be easily translated into the terms of a universal system of classification...Predecessors of our idea of ethnicity are the concepts of ‘race’ and ‘nation’ in their modern senses, which the pseudo-biological ideas of modern racial theory so prevalent in the early nineteenth century.” Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 268-90.

³⁶ E.g., “Many physical anthropologists now believe that, because there is as much genetic variation among the members of any given race as there is between the groups identified as different races, the concept of race is unscientific and unsound and racial categories are arbitrary.” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, 6 ed. (Columbia University Press, 2008), accessed March 17, 2010 at <http://www.encyclopedia.com/topic/race.aspx>.

³⁷ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 69.

found even in sociocultural structures that serve biological, social and spiritual needs, noting ethnographic studies that portray an immense variety and impressive similarity of human beings.³⁸ Beneath the myriad of cultures, languages, and genders lies a floor of commonality that is handed down without variation from one generation to the next. Like the immediate family of Adam, human beings mimic him both in his original value and original sin, his grandeur and grandiosity, as God-seeker and image-maker. Despite variations of ethnicity and culture, all individuals have inherited the same fundamental gifts from their Creator and suffer the same fallen condition.

What do these racial universals mean for the MEC? First, they correct the tendencies of Western culture and especially modern America which exaggerates cultural differences by focusing on visible physical features (skin color, hair type, etc), or mental and emotional traits. When familiar racial identifiers are used in the Bible, it is simply to differentiate between people and people groups without ascribing value. This avoids racial identifiers indicating the possession or lack of possession of innate abilities or physical features. Second, these universals provide the MEC with a basis for meaningful interpersonal relationships across cultures in community.³⁹ A study by Eugene Nida found a “great similarity among human beings that provides the basis on which the potential for cross-cultural human understanding and intercultural communication rest...”⁴⁰ Nida added that “even though specific behavior within any one area of life may differ, the range of common human experience is sufficiently similar to

³⁸ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 69.

³⁹ Luzbetak writes, “If such human commonality were not a fact, cross-cultural communication and harmonious cross-cultural interaction – and mission itself – would be impossible. The Bible would not be the universal book that it is; nor would the Good News be good news for all societies...” Luzbetak, *Church and Cultures*, 158.

⁴⁰ Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 70.

provide a basis for mutual understanding.”⁴¹ Steven Pinker, MIT professor of psychology, concurs. Despite radical differences between human cultures, he argues, people can meaningfully interact on the basis of, among other things, universal linguistic patterns.⁴² Widely noted Roman Catholic anthropologist, Louis Luzbetak, cautions missiologists to “guard against overlooking or downplaying common human traits...Individual cultures are but different answers to fundamentally panhuman questions.”⁴³ These findings come as a welcomed encouragement and justify investment into building cross-cultural relationships. Over the past ten years language comprehension has posed the most formidable challenge for GRIF in enabling social interaction through which community cohesion is built. Achieving mutual understanding requires energy, to be sure, but also something more. It necessitates the will to invest that energy. But what rouses such resolve? Later we will show that this is the point in which Christ followers have unique resources at their disposal.

Ethnicity

The Genesis portrayal of ethnicity discussed above remains intact throughout Scripture and its meaning enlarged. Noted Christian anthropologist, Darrell Whiteman,⁴⁴ informs us that despite the fact that it points to an old reality, the term itself is relatively

⁴¹ Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 55; quoted by Kraft, *Christianity in Culture*, 70.

⁴² “Universal mental mechanisms can underlie superficial variation across cultures...Humans speak some six thousand mutually unintelligible languages. Nonetheless, the grammatical programs in their minds differ far less than the actual speech coming out of their mouths.” Steven Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (NY: Viking, 2002), 37. This concurs with Noam Chomsky (b. 1928) who maintains that “human beings have a built-in capacity to acquire language...[and] have an inborn competence to abstract the basic grammar rules from the infinitude of speech sounds heard in early childhood.” Luzbetak, *Church and Cultures*, 30.

⁴³ Luzbetak, *Church and Cultures*, 158.

⁴⁴ Darrell L. Whiteman, vice president and resident missiologist at The Mission Society in Atlanta, GA, served for 21 years as professor of cultural anthropology and then dean of the E. Stanley Jones School of World Mission and Evangelism at Asbury Theological Seminary, and is the former editor of *Missiology*.

new.⁴⁵

Gift and not a problem. The Christian perception of ethnicity must be that of gift rather than a liability. This was one of the conclusions demonstrated in Whiteman's helpful study in which he insists that ethnicity must be distinguished from "divisive ethnicity" as often portrayed. Rather than a problem to be solved⁴⁶ it, in fact, should be reason for celebration as eloquently noted by Lamin Sanneh:

Ethnicity is not the failure of human oneness; it is an enrichment of it. Ethnicity is not in itself an obstacle to the unity of family and nation. What is the obstacle is the ideology that we should all conform to one central cultural norm. Human difference is the hallowed mystery about us as persons; uniformity is the affront of disobedience to that mystery. It is when we play God and demand undifferentiated obeisance to a central rule that we endanger human potential in its rich and beautiful diversity and difference. It is difficult to receive the Jesus of place and time through the vessels and arteries of his own ethnic mother's blood and milk and not celebrate diversity in all its concreteness and rich variety.⁴⁷

Instinct for Survival and Continuity. In psychological terms ethnicity often carries with it an instinct for survival and continuity when a group's future is threatened.⁴⁸ George DeVos describes it as:

A sense of common origin, common beliefs and values, a common sense of survival... a feeling of continuity with the past, a feeling that is maintained as an essential part of one's self-definition [It is] intimately related to the individual's need for collective continuity. The individual senses to some degree a threat of his [/her] own survival if his group or lineage is threatened with extinction.

⁴⁵ The term ethnicity "...does not appear in the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but it does make the 1972 *Supplement*. It appears in 1961 in *Webster's Third New International*, but not in the 1966 *Dictionary of the English Language*, nor the 1969 edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (Glazer and Moynihan 1975:1). Prior to 1945 the term ethnicity was associated with the term "heathen" or "pagan" (Barnhart 1988; Ayto 1991). Whiteman, *Missiology*, 59-70.

⁴⁶ "Where ethnicity runs amok it becomes divisive. Cultural differences are to be celebrated within the church and mission, but when they become instruments of power and abuse they become divisive, and divisive ethnicity becomes a serious problem... The distinction between ethnicity in itself and divisive ethnicity is important to make, despite the fact that the literature on ethnicity does not make this distinction... In the sense that ethnicity is a celebration of cultural diversity it is a gift of God's grace to humanity and should not be considered evil." Darrell L. Whiteman, *The Role of Ethnicity and Culture in Shaping Western Mission Agency Identity*, *Missiology* 34, No 1 (Ja, 2006): 59-70.

⁴⁷ Lamin Sanneh, "Theology and the Challenge of Ethnicity: The Ethnic Issue in Translation with Reference to Africa," unpublished manuscript presented at the Yale-Edinburgh, Scotland, 1996. Cited by Whiteman, *Missiology*, 64.

⁴⁸ Whiteman, *Missiology*, 64.

Ethnicity, therefore, includes a sense of personal survival in the historical continuity of the group. Ethnicity in its deepest psychological level is a sense of survival. If one's group survives, one is assured of survival."⁴⁹

We often see this survival instinct especially in first-generation immigrants who desire for their children to not forget their heritage.

Sanctioned by the Incarnation. God's endorsement of ethnicity and culture is demonstrated in the incarnation. The "positive Christian view of ethnicity" that finds its basis especially in the incarnation and example of Jesus impinges on the MEC. Paul Borthwick reminds us that "God's endorsement of ethnicity and cultural specificity in the incarnation [that] serves as the motivation for the cross-cultural adaptation of both the message and the method of communicating the gospel."⁵⁰ He continues, "Even though he [Jesus] was God, he took upon himself a human body and was shaped in a particular cultural context – he was a Galilean Jew. That is the way God enters cultures and saves people. God takes culture very seriously. So should intercultural evangelists"⁵¹

Subordinate to a Greater Identity. In terms of relative value, ethnic identity must be subordinated to the greater identity in Adam or in Christ. Biblical anthropology avoids making value judgments between subgroups. Charles H. Cosgrove distinguishes modern understanding of ethnicity with that of the ancient Mediterranean world. The former leads "us to think of any people's identity not in fixed, essentialist terms but in historical ones," whereas the latter, "notably the Romans tended to classify peoples according to fixed characteristics and geographical origin."⁵² Drawing from an extensive

⁴⁹George DeVos, "Ethnic Pluralism: Conflict and Accommodation," *Cultural Continuities and Change*, George DeVos and Lola Romanucci-Ross, eds. (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 5-21; quoted by Whiteman, *Missiology*, 65.

⁵⁰ Paul Borthwick, "Affirming Ethnic Identity, Combating Ethnocentricity: Foundations for Training Christian Leaders," (D.Min. thesis, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, 2007), 6-11.

⁵¹ Borthwick, "Combating Ethnocentricity," 10.

⁵² Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 269.

study of Diaspora Jews in the Mediterranean world by John M. G. Barclay, ethnicity for Jewish people contained two essential components. "Ancient Jewish ethnicity," he writes, is "a continuum of ancestry plus cultural practice."⁵³ Its emphasis is the single race of the universal human family containing smaller familial units within the whole. As noted earlier in the Table of Nations, these ethnic units represent God's distributive providence on behalf of the human family. Personhood is a higher value than the identifying traits of its many families.

Natural Ethnicity Superseded by Spiritual Ethnicity. Closely related is that for believers, our spiritual "ethnicity" (1 Pet 2:9-10) supersedes physical ethnicity. While this will be enlarged later, it is of utmost significance for the MEC. Frances Hiebert captures the tension when she notes,

We cannot escape the universality of the Gospel. Everyone is invited in; no one can be automatically ruled out. The gospel of Jesus transcends every humanly drawn boundary, be it ethnic, sexual, or sociopolitical. There is no Jew nor Greek, no male nor female, no slave or free. We are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28). As a result of the second birth, we inherit a new ethnic identity. We are born into the spiritual family of God and no matter what our physical ethnicity, it is superseded by this new, spiritual ethnicity.⁵⁴

Biblically speaking then, ethnicity should be distinguished from modern sociological terms such as "multiracial" that are commonly drawn from secular fields. Calling society to become one of "racial equality," in biblical people typically mean "ethnic" equality.

Particularity

In addition to ethnicity, the term "particularity" helps us identify in a positive way "the unique characteristics of individuals, families, communities, or cultures." Generally a

⁵³ John M. G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE -117 CE)* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1996), 405-7; quoted in Cosgrove, 271. These Jews designated themselves as : ἔθνος ("people, nation"), φῶλον ("tribe"), γένος ("people by descent"), and λαός ("people").

⁵⁴ Frances F. Hiebert, "Doing Mission with a Universal Gospel and Cultural Diversity." *Direction* 17, 1, (1988), 81-86; quoted by Darrell Whiteman, "Role of Ethnicity," *Missiology*, 1.

positive term, it may be used to designate one's culture by saying, "One of the things that makes our culture unique (i.e., our particularity) is our music."⁵⁵ This term honors cultural distinctives and renders the notion of "color blindness" as offensive. Equality is not synonymous with sameness.⁵⁶ Oliver R. Philips who was born and raised in Trinidad and serves as the USA/Canada Mission Strategy Director for the Church of the Nazarene, was invited to lecture our ministry leaders on the subject of race. He compared white people saying, "I don't see you as a black person," to telling a female 'I don't see you as a woman,'" an observation not generally received well. A MEC is not color blind in that sense. Distinct from stereotyping, a negative term that denies individuality within an ethnic group, particularity positively recognizes uniquely distinguishing customs of a group.

Culture

Overlapping with particularity is "culture," defined by *The Willowbank Report on Gospel and Culture* as:

...an integrated system of beliefs (about God or reality or ultimate meaning), of values (about what is true, good, beautiful and normative), of customs (how to behave, relate to others, talk, pray, dress, work, play, trade, farm, eat, etc.), and of institutions which express these beliefs, values and customs (government, law courts, temples or churches, family, schools, hospitals, factories, shops, unions, clubs, etc.) which binds a society together and gives it a sense of identity, dignity, security, and continuity.⁵⁷

Understanding culture becomes essential for the MEC for several reasons.

(1) Repentance and conversion. When anyone comes to faith in Christ, it becomes necessary to know what is cultural and what is not. J. H. Bavinck's succinct definition,

⁵⁵ Borthwick, "Combating Ethnocentricity," 10.

⁵⁶ Ideas of particularity will become more prominent in Paul's discussions of diversity in unity in such passages as Galatians 3:28 and will be introduced later.

⁵⁷ *Lausanne Occasional Papers: No. 2: The Willowbank Report – Gospel and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization, 1978), 7. Cf. Luzbetak, *Church and Cultures*, 74-75.

"Culture is religion made visible,"⁵⁸ stresses how culture integrates with religious devotion and requires discernment in regards to what constitutes the core of repentance for anyone coming to Christ, not only from another religion but from secular and materialist ideologies. A "collision" is inevitable:

True conversion to Christ is bound, therefore, to strike at the heart of our cultural inheritance. Jesus Christ insists on dislodging from the center of our world whatever idol previously reigned there, and occupying the throne himself. This is the radical change of allegiance which constitutes conversion, or at least its beginning. Then once Christ has taken his rightful place, everything else starts shifting. The shock waves flow from the centre to the circumference. The convert has to rethink his or her fundamental convictions. This is metanoia, "repentance" viewed as a change of mind, the replacement of "the mind of the flesh" by "the mind of Christ."⁵⁹

The Willowbank statement also cautions the church against "de-culturalizing" persons upon their new belief in Christ. For "conversion does not unmake; it remakes,"⁶⁰ as new believers are "still the same people with the same heritage and the same family."

(2) Community Enrichment. Another reason to clearly understand culture lies in the ways that it graces Christian community. It does so as a reflection of redeemed creation in its diversity by its common worship to God and reflects the fullness of the Christ's kingdom. Cosgrove argues against this as of biblical importance, positing instead interethnic diversity to be a post-biblical value produced by utopian impulse.⁶¹ The biblical emphasis of value, he contends, is spiritual gifts and not ethnicity and culture. What are we to make of this? His point is well-taken if the church adopts either an ethnocentric fixation or the other extreme of a vaunted multiculturalism as its

⁵⁸ Willowbank, *Gospel and Culture*, 20.

⁵⁹ Willowbank, *Gospel and Culture*, 20.

⁶⁰ Willowbank, *Gospel and Culture*, 21.

⁶¹ "As for valuing ethnicity in the interests of diversity, the greater human richness that comes from the interaction and contributions of different ethnic groups, this is another modern value. Although Paul affirms a kind of equality in diversity when it comes to the different members and their spiritual gifts in the church (1 Corinthians 12), he nowhere applies this model of diversity to ethnicity. Most important, to the extent that this modern way of valuing diversity is Utopian (a projection of an ultimate ideal), it clashes with Paul's own Utopian vision, the ultimate eschatological future, when all this-worldly diversity will come to an end in the full realization of the new creation (Gal 3:28; 6:15; 1 Cor 7:31). Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Journal*, 281.

supreme value, “a projection of an ultimate ideal.” Narrowing the benefits of diversity to spiritual gifts, nevertheless, seems problematic on two counts. First, while referencing 1 Corinthians 12, he overlooks the heart of the apostle’s elucidation of Christ’s diverse body: “For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (1 Cor 12:13 ESV). In addition to charismatic diversification, the apostle highlights both ethnic as well as social elements. GRIF has found that the volitional intermingling of these elements distinguishes the church in society far more than multiple charismata alone. Second, Cosgrove pits the Utopian visions of Paul against those of the secularists at the point of eliminating diversity, “when all this diversity will come to an end in the full realization of the new creation.” He bases his conclusion upon an understanding of Galatians 3:28, “no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female,” that interprets it through an “apocalyptic” lens as understood by J. Louis Martyn who, for reasons not clear to the present writer, anticipates “the end of differences.”⁶² In an otherwise profound study, this reading ignores the wider canonical testimony from the dawn of creation that extols a spectacular diversity, one that includes both genders (Gen 1:27), to the culmination of history that incorporates all nations (Rev 5:9; 7:4-10, etc.). Anticipation of a period of ultimate non-differentiation stretches plausibility.

Ethnocentricity

On the negative or “fallen” side of the ledger we find ethnocentricity defined as “the exaggeration of ethnic identity that affirms that one’s own ethnicity is not only unique

⁶² J. Louis Martyn, “Galatians 3:28, Faculty Appointments and Overcoming Christological Amnesia,” *Katallagete* 8, No. 1 (1982), 41; quoted in Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Journal*, 279. The “new creation” it is implied, overcomes “fundamental polarities by which the world is constructed have come to an end. If differences must be simultaneously preserved and transcended, diversity both established and overcome, one way to think of this is to regard differentiation as penultimate and the end of differentiation as ultimate... In that consummation of all things, ethnic differences will disappear, giving way to the ultimate;” quoted in Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Journal*, 279.

but superior to the culture and ethnicity of others....”⁶³ An ethnocentric person has a “view of things in which one’s own group is the center of everything. Each group nourishes its own pride and vanity and boasts itself superior and looks with contempt on others.”⁶⁴ This identifies the crucial difference between healthy particularity and fallen ethnocentricity. Ethnocentricity arises as well simply from sheltered parochial naiveté, what Whiteman calls the “default-mode of the un-travelled,”⁶⁵ innocence captured by a Kikuyu proverb that says “he who does not travel thinks his mother is the world’s best cook.”⁶⁶ Slight modification might serve this definition by dividing it into a naïve level that characterizes those from homogenous environments who naturally appraise their own culture as normative and a culpable level that devalues others and or their cultures who are ethnically different.⁶⁷

Appreciation for one’s culture is not to be confused with ethnocentric attitudes. Sinful ethnocentricity distinguishes itself from healthy particularity in its effects. The latter produces delight. When ethnic groups such as our Burmese⁶⁸ friends gather in our gym for highly decorated traditional dinners and folk dances, the experience is profoundly moving. It thrives with beauty and creativity and they are eager for others to see it. The Sudanese have similar cultural celebrations that bear their distinctive history and genius. Ethnocentricity, on the other hand, causes heartbreak. This pastor invited GRIF’s Sudanese men to a roundtable discussion for the purpose of sharing these definitions,

⁶³ Borthwick, “Combating Ethnocentricity,” 10.

⁶⁴ Douglas R. Sharp, *No Partiality: The Idolatry of Race and the New Humanity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 163; quoted in Borthwick, “Combating Ethnocentricity,” 11.

⁶⁵ Whiteman, *Missiology*, 69.

⁶⁶ Whiteman, *Missiology*, 70.

⁶⁷ The common attitudes of ancient Rome apparently had little problem with ethnocentricity at either level. According to Cosgrove, “Many ancient people were ethnocentric, but...ancient Mediterraneans did not think it wrong to view their own group as superior to others.” Cosgrove, *Catholic Biblical Journal*, 270.

⁶⁸ Most of the refugees in Grand Rapids prefer calling their country Burma over Myanmar.

listen to their ideas and learn ways for GRIF to improve its integrating efforts. When we came to ethnocentricity, they were asked if any of them had experiences they could share. Their initial reticence gave way to unanimous responses of what it feels like to be treated as second-class citizens in a fiercely ethnocentric culture. As a white man living in a culture dominated by white people, it caused this author to see how easy it is to enter restaurants, stores and other public areas without ever pausing to consider whether the service they render me will be like that of customers of a different hue. The same applies to taking a job that forces me to complete undesirable tasks that no one else is willing to do.

Racism

Racism, ethnocentricity in its extreme form, is “the use of race as the central criterion by which an individual or a group judges other people.” From a biblical perspective, it “is a denial that all people have been created in the image of God.”⁶⁹ It considers a group flawed, that is, not by the crimes it has committed but in its essence, and incapable of redemption. This proceeds from a demeaning appraisal of one ethnic group to a denial of humanity itself. Stated simply, anything that dehumanizes others on the basis of pigmentation or ethnic affiliation is racism. A racist is anyone who is blinded to the positive attributes of a people group, an inability to detect such qualities based upon a selective focus on their perceived deficiencies. Its evil surfaces in what it denies, full personhood, a diminishment that justifies another’s destruction either in part or in whole.

Fallen human tendencies toward ethnocentricity and racism threatening the unity

⁶⁹ J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 50; quoted by Borthwick, “Combatting Ethnocentrism,” 12.

of the MEC have prompted some authors to raise questions about its viability.⁷⁰ To properly assess their arguments, however, we must hasten to the other elements to be added in biblical redemption.⁷¹

Landmark 2: Abrahamic Covenant — One Nation for All

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you
and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.
... and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."
--Genesis 12:1-3

If the Bible concluded with Genesis 11, a considerable body of information would enlighten interethnic issues but without adequate resources to heal them. As valuable to the MEC as biblical anthropology and ethnographic studies are, they fall short of advancing a cure to the conflicts within the human family. Genesis 12, however, begins a story of promise launching forward a world-changing plan of profound hope. "Mission is ... a movement from God to the world," writes Anna Marie Aagaard.⁷² In contrast to "missions," envisioned either as a subset of soteriology or a function of the church, mission is "derived from the very nature of God" because "God is a missionary God." For "it is not the church that has a mission of salvation to fulfill in the world. It is the mission of the Son and the Spirit through the Father that includes the church."⁷³ Mission

⁷⁰ See, for example, p 104, n 188.

⁷¹ Each Christian's dual identities, concludes Whiteman, does not require a choice of either/or: "It is both a challenge and possibility to live with both ethnic and spiritual identities... Ethnic diversity is not eliminated in order to come together as God's children, nor does it get in the way. In fact, our ethnic and cultural identity become subordinate and secondary to our primary identity as God's children. Inclusion of human cultural diversity is necessary to give us a fuller picture of God's creation and how we need all of these perspectives from different languages and cultures to be able to understand God in all of God's fullness." Whiteman, *Missiology*, 66-67.

⁷² Anna Marie Aagaard, "Missio Dei in katholischer Sicht," *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974): 420-433; quoted by David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 390.

⁷³ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

happens “since God is a fountain of sending love.”⁷⁴ This fountainhead of divine love surfaces in the book of Genesis through its literary structure, geography and narrative. Structurally, its two main divisions of chapters 1-11, “primordial history,” and chapters 12-50, “patriarchal history,” present the latter answering the fundamental problem of the former.⁷⁵ The first section devotes only two chapters to the creation, one to Adam’s Fall from innocence, but eight to its consequences. Here we find the fury of violence and a surging flood of depravity in which the human race was already drowning prior to Noah’s deluge. Genesis “is moving us progressively from generation (chs. 1-2), to degeneration (chs. 3-11), to regeneration (chs. 12-50).”⁷⁶ Seen in this way, Genesis 12:1-3 is groundbreaking, a precursor to human survival, a preview of a new kind of life order against a culture gone ominously decadent. It redresses a wounded world with divine promise, word of hope and full of grace.⁷⁷ OT scholar, Victor Hamilton, observes that “After the series of sorry examples presented in chapters 1-11, we are meant to read chs. 12ff (patriarchal history) as the solution to this problem. Will there be more Adams and more tower builders? Or is there a way out of this dilemma?” Starkly contrasting the sorry models parading before him, we find Abraham, the man of faith who has been apprehended by the gracious covenant-making God, to be different from the rest. Not intent on making his name great, he becomes one upon whom greatness is bestowed. A covenant with humankind signified by a rainbow (Gen 9:8-17) is now augmented by a

⁷⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 390.

⁷⁵ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 9-10.

⁷⁶ Hamilton, *Genesis*, 372.

⁷⁷ Christopher Wright explains, “Just as the New Testament withholds our introduction to Jesus until we have been reminded of what went before, so the Old Testament brings Israel on stage (in the loins of Abraham) in Genesis 12, only after an extensive introduction to the dilemma of the whole human race. Genesis 1-11 is entirely occupied with humanity as a whole, the world of all nations, and with the apparently insoluble problem of their corporate evil. So the story of Israel which begins at chapter 12 is actually God’s answer to the problem of humanity.” Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 36.

covenant with a family.⁷⁸

God's "sending love" continues to be seen through the geographic design that covers the populated world as chapters 1-11 are set in Babylon, chapters 12-36 in Palestine and chapters 37-50 in Egypt. What does this mean?

...each part of the Mediterranean world is highlighted in some part of Genesis. The crucial center section of Genesis (chs. 12-36) is bracketed geographically by two sections in the Near Eastern world with whose history Israel would be constantly interlocked. The impact created by these broad geographical contours is that Genesis is a book about world history...

The ultimate reason for the election of Abraham is that the nations of the earth (such as those falling within the geographical boundaries of chs. 1-11 and 37-50) might find the knowledge of God and his blessing.⁷⁹

Through what nation would God usher in this new day of hope? One might assume of the great empires of the day, but God overlooked them. Instead, he chose a man through whom he would build a nation owing to him its very existence. In an act of sheer grace and remarkable foresight, God selected a single individual, Abram and his family, to receive special favors and blessings. Does this reflect an ethnic partiality on the part of the Bible as suggested to this author by a Pakistani Muslim on a visit to his mosque in Grand Rapids? He asked, "Why do you Christians think that Jews are God's chosen people?...It is wrong to say that anyone or any group is 'chosen.'"⁸⁰ The very idea of divine selection as he understood it becomes an affront to anyone's sense of justice, especially by those finding themselves excluded from the roster. In the present case with Abraham, blessings proceed to him and his seed, but ultimately extend to all other nations (Gen 12:1-3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4-5). It looks ahead to an unspecified time when

⁷⁸ Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 36.

⁷⁹ Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 10.

⁸⁰ Joseph P. Knight, "Muslim Questions for Christians: What Diaspora Muslims in Grand Rapids, Michigan Would Like to Ask Christians About their Beliefs and Practices," 2008, p 29, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, D. Min. course MS 1023: Contextualization and Translatability: Christian Mission in a World of Religions, Project 2.

the restrictive border of the single family line will dissolve to permit entrance of outsiders into the family of blessing. In this way, divine gifts will be made available universally through Abraham's "seed." Because this covenant launches the biblical story of redemption, Hamilton's substantive exegetical insights merit a close look. For the sake of brevity, they are noted below.⁸¹

Despite this covenant of grace entering the human family narrowly through one man and his descendants, it heralds a salvation explicitly universal in scope so as to preempt a charge of divine favoritism. As Wright observes, "The rest of the world was not absent from the mind and purpose of God in all his dealings with Israel. Indeed,

⁸¹ In addressing the Abrahamic covenant, Hamilton identifies 'three promises of greatness and the four blessings' to Abraham totaling seven clauses (vv. 2-3) and demonstrates the penchant of the Old Testament for "grouping literary material in heptads." Citation of R. Gordis regarding the midrash (Bereshit Rabbah 39:11). Hamilton, *Genesis*, 374. The grammar of the Abrahamic covenant strengthens its international scope as noted well by Victor Hamilton. Numerals have been added for the sake of clarity:

God will make of Abram a *great nation*. This expression is intriguing, for the Hebrew word for *nation* is *goy*, a word used frequently in the OT to describe the gentile nations in the world ... (10:5, 10, 31, 32). God here does not promise to make of Abram a great people (*yam*). Israel will be a *goy* among the *goyim* ... [Abram's descendants will be those who grow into] the status of a nation (18:18; 25:23; 35:11; 46:3)

I will bless you. To receive a promise of becoming a great nation would itself be a blessing, especially in view of Sarah's barrenness (11:30). A great nation, at least to get started, needs both an ancestor and an ancestress.

[Abram's] *name* will be *famous*. [This is in] deliberate contrast with the Tower of Babel incident. One of the aspirations of those builders was "to make a name for ourselves." ... they did get an ironic name for their city: Babel. The builders' aggressiveness is matched by Abram's passiveness. ... The great name will be a gift, not an achievement.

Verse 2 concludes with an imperative *and be a blessing* (v 2).

There are two imperatives. The first is "go" in verse 1 and followed by this "be a blessing" in verse 2. Applied to Gen. 12:1-2, this construction means that the first imperative, *go*, is related as effect to cause to this second imperative, *be*. Abram cannot be a blessing if he stays in Haran. But if he leaves, then a blessing he will be. If we are correct in seeing here seven phrases in God's initial speech to Abram, then this one is the middle one, and perhaps for that reason a more crucial statement, or at least a pivotal one. The blessings of God are not all to be turned in on Abram. A great nation, blessed, a great name – yes. But Abram must be more than a recipient. He is both a receptacle for the divine blessing and a transmitter of that blessing. God states that his relationship to others will be determined by the relationship of these others to Abram. Abram can expect to encounter both those who will *bless* him and those who will *curse* him.

The grand finale in this catalogue of blessings and promises is: (so that) *by you all the earth's clans will be blessed*. Again, the syntax of this passage helps isolate this climactic phrase. This unit began with an imperative, continued with a number of first singular imperfects (punctuated with an imperative what has imperfective force), and now climaxes with a perfect... V. 2 had already said that Abram would be a blessing. But to whom? For whom? Now we have our answer:

all the earth's clans (or peoples, families), like those mentioned in Genesis 10. Here is Yahweh's programmatic statement. Sinister nations and peoples of the earth, such as we read about in chs. 3-11, are to be blessed through Abram. Hamilton, *Genesis*, 374.

...God so loved the *world* that he chose *Israel*.⁸² Divine election carried the idea of one for all. "The particularism of Israel's history is a *particular means* for a *universal goal*."⁸³ Genesis 12, then, launches a long but hopeful journey directly repairing the dilemmas endemic to fallen human society, answering universal questions churning out of this condition.

What hope can there be for a world as beautiful and yet as ugly, as structured and yet as disordered, as full of potential for brotherly love, and yet as poisoned with envy and hate? What hope is there for a people who have abandoned God, and have thereby abandoned each other? Can 'the creation community' be restored?⁸⁴

From this covenant, the biblical story of redemption pushes forward in a giant arc throughout history to heal human divisions towards a new community with God at its center.

Landmark 3: Mosaic Covenant – Antithetical Allies in the World

...you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.
--Exodus 19:6 NASB

The Mosaic covenant at Sinai follows the Abrahamic covenant by 430 years (Gal 3:17), yet it lies much closer than its chronological appearance suggests. John P. Milton reminds us that "there is a goal to redemptive history"⁸⁵ that began with Abraham and all subsequent covenants contribute something to the fulfillment of that goal. What specific contribution did this covenant add to advance the Abrahamic covenant one step further to Israel's destiny to bless the nations at large? Conventional wisdom might assume that

⁸² Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 39.

⁸³ Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 39.

⁸⁴ Atkinson, *Genesis 1-11*, 188.

⁸⁵ John P. Milton, *God's Covenant of Blessing*, (Madison, Wisconsin: Straus Publishing, 1965), 136.

to fulfill such an assignment would require Israel to radically identify with her neighboring nations. Can there be influence without proximity? The value of this landmark to the MEC is the way in which it establishes the nature of the relationship of the people of God with non-believers in general but especially with those having allegiances to ideologies or spiritual deities that rival the Triune God. With remarkable prescience, this covenant anticipates the very missional issues of the twenty-first century church in pluralist culture. Should it integrate itself in the culture and take on its priorities in order to win it over? How are we to understand our role in pluralist society as Christians and then act upon that knowledge?

The enduring attitudinal posture of the people of God towards their surrounding religious neighbors becomes apparent through the Mosaic Covenant by the motif "antithetical allies." An ally denotes one who helps, often joining in a fight against a common enemy in battle. Antithetical, on the other hand, stands diametrically opposed to something or someone else. How is it possible to simultaneously fill both roles? Exodus 19:4-6 which immediately precedes the giving of the Decalogue provides us with clues. These verses remind Israel of her special relationship to God by virtue of his miraculous redemption from Egypt on her behalf ("how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself "). This special revelation becomes the prelude of grace that now calls her into a covenant relationship through her obedience to the Decalogue. Her special privilege in the world among other nations ("you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples...and a holy nation") was not to be interpreted as divine disregard for those nations. God's remembrance of his promise to Abraham to ultimately bless them through his descendants is made evident here by designating her special vocation in the world as a "kingdom of priests." How was Israel to mediate blessings to idolatrous nations? Representing the living God on earth as his mediators meant that she must be set apart from them to him. This simultaneous connection to God in

holiness for the purpose of blessing fallen cultures and sinful people groups did not originate here at Sinai. Abraham, who preceded this covenant by over 400 years, had already lived as an antithetical ally amidst cultures whose "sin is exceedingly grave" (Gen 18:20), from whom he kept a holy detachment (Gen 18:19) for the purpose of blessing them (Gen 18:17-18)!

Antithesis for Israel meant taking on a posture of distance as well as an attitude of abhorrence toward anything connected with the idolatrous practices of her neighbors. Yahweh had come to them dramatically and unmistakably as the only living God at Sinai. The covenant made there, the Decalogue itself, was delivered directly to the people in first-person divine speech: "The LORD spoke to you face to face" (Deut 5:4) with words of identity ("I am the LORD your God...", v 6) and grace ("who brought you out of Egypt," v 6) who now called for her exclusive love ("You shall have no other gods before Me," v 7; "I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God," v 9) and worship fitting to his majesty ("You shall not make for yourself an idol...", v 8). The essence of this covenant came in the creed: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart..." (Deut 6:4). To love the living God who displayed his power (Deut 4:35) and lavished his elective grace (Deut 7:6-9) and abundant blessings (Deut 10:21-2) meant to abhor all other gods which are fraudulent (Deut 11:14-16) and to loathe detestable practices (Deut 12:31; 18:9-11).

To bless others, Israel must remain distinct. She was assigned a unique place in the world, juxtaposed to two reference points, the God who had showered blessings upon her and the nations to whom those blessings would ultimately reach. Israel was divinely appointed to serve the world as a "kingdom of priests" (Exod 19:6), an ally even in its sinfulness while at the same time maintaining a distinctive character that differentiated her from other nations. To serve them, she must not share in their idolatry and alienation. This marker shows how Israel, to assume the role of blessing others

must themselves become countercultural as an antithetical society.

For our purposes, these OT linkages between salvation, identity and mission mirrors the MEC (1 Pet 2:8-9). Those called to a destiny of blessing others must themselves be marked out with distinction. Specifically, as a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” among the rest, God expects Israel to exhibit his own character in the world rather than to mirror its culture. Since he is holy, so Israel must be holy (Lev 19:2, etc.). Redeemed from her slavery in Egypt she now belongs to Yahweh so that she might be free to fulfill her greater mission in the world (See Lev 19:2, 15; 19:15, 33-34; 20:24-6; Deut 14:2; Josh 24:14-15; Amos 3:1-2 and NT counterpart, 1 Cor 3:3; 2 Cor 6:14-7:1; Eph 4:17f; 5:8; 1 Pet 1:14-16; 2:11-12 etc.). If Israel copied her neighbors, she could not be a vital channel for their redemption. The MEC must be doggedly exclusive as it pertains to truth and inclusive when it comes to people. As the Mosaic Covenant specified authorized places and times of worship, so the MEC must guard the integrity of its worship. “Worship set the Israelites apart from the worship conducted by the pagans and accented their relationship with Yahweh (Deut 12).”⁸⁶

Antithetical alliance would reach its revelatory apex in Jesus. The One who dined at the table with sinners (Matt 9:10) was one and the same as he who came to destroy the works of the devil (1 John 3:8). Jesus was not introducing something novel but repristinating Israel’s call. Later this would find its parallel in the dual nature of the church revealed in the high priestly prayer of Jesus (John 16:7). Christians must hate well so that they can love rightly (Rom 12:9). Is it possible for the MEC to practice exclusive worship of the Triune God along with an inclusive concern for its neighbor? Can it exclude false deities and pagan practices yet embrace those yoked to them? This expectation is not a passing juxtaposition for an Old Testament nation but remains a

⁸⁶ Robert E. Webber, *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, ed. by Robert E. Webber (Peabody, MASS: Henderson Publishers, 1993), 129.

fixed identity for the people of God. GRIF seeks to be antithetical allies in our world by engaging Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam with the truth of God while embracing the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Muslim with the grace of God.

Landmark 4: The Psalms – Creation Sings, Nations Rejoice

Let the nations be glad and sing for joy;
For You will judge the peoples with uprightness
And guide the nations on the earth.
--Psalm 67:4 NASB

The Psalms, Wisdom Literature's most voluminous book, shape the heart of Christian life and worship. One contribution of the Psalms to the MEC is its uncontainable praise that reaches the nations. It is a book that exposes the heart of a God who makes the nations glad. It beckons them to know their bountiful Creator, find Israel's gracious Redeemer and celebrate earth's righteous Judge! Lest our picture of God becomes one who is parsimonious in revelatory scope or provincial in elective attachment, this book that whispers intimately to the quiet mysteries of the soul also reverberates in the praise of God to "the ends of the earth" (Ps 67:7) that all may be saved. This is no empty adoration, but that which is won through the outer wrappings of general revelation expressed metaphorically by seas that roar, fields that exult and trees that sing for joy (Ps 96:11b). So "let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice!" (Ps 96:11a) because "the LORD reigns...He will judge the peoples with equity" (Ps 96:10). Joining that chorus as though in stereophonic complement, the Lord is praised through the spoken witness of special revelation. The immediacy and breadth of this complementary witness feeds into the MEC through multiple connecting points of creation in its majesty, salvation in its availability and judgment in its unfailing equity.

The God of the Psalms is the Creator of heaven and earth (Ps 65:6-23; 104) who richly blesses his people Israel (Pss 33:12; 147:20) and yet reigns over all nations (Pss

22:28; 47:8; 82:8). He judges the peoples (Pss 9:8, 17; 67:4; 96:13; 82:8; 118:10; 135:10), individuals (Pss 11:4; 14:2; 33:13) and idolatry (Pss 96:5; 135:15), showing the nations that they are “but men” (9:19-20). Although Israel is often in the prevailing position over the Gentiles (Pss 2:8; 18:43-47; 45:5; 72:10-11; 110:5-6, esp 47:3), yet the Psalmists exult in a future of universalistic praise to Yahweh (Pss 2:11; 22:25-28; 65:2; 66:4; 67:5-7; 68:32; 86:9; 99:3; 102:15; 117:1; 138:4; 86:1-10; 72:17).

How is that possible on a global scale? It will be because he is the God who makes himself conspicuous throughout his created world. He has the will and the means of doing so. Because “the earth is the LORD’s and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it” (Ps 24:1 NASB), it is his desire to be known widely, worshiped wholeheartedly and obeyed universally (Pss 67:2, 4; 72:11, 17; 96:7; 117:1-2). Because of the proclamations of his handiwork in creation (Pss 19:1; 104; 65:6-13) and the declarations of his saving deeds by his people among the nations (Ps 57:9; 108:3). Nations must hear the suffering servant in Psalm 22:27, for he calls them to himself: “All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” Without fanfare, the Lord will be praised: “Be still and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth” (Ps 46:10) or with vociferous reverb: “Clap your hands, all you peoples. Shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great King over all the earth” (Ps 47:1).

But for the nations to worship requires knowledge of him. Knowledge requires revelation. How will the nations come to know him? In the Psalms we find that knowledge through intercessory appeals (Ps 67:1-7), through the church blessed to bless others (Ps 67:1-2), offering praise to God among those in religion (Ps 96:2-6), inviting them to him (Ps 96:9-13).

Witness takes the form of glad doxology in foreign places: “I will give thanks to

you, O LORD, among the peoples. I will sing praise to you, O LORD, among the nations. Be exalted, O God, above the heavens. Let your glory be over all the earth” (Ps 57:9-10). Intercessory prayer took the form of inclusive salvation. What is so surprising for an OT book is the application of elective theology at its Abrahamic covenant best. Though truth is slender the appeal is broad. He bends Aaron’s blessing, “God be gracious to us and bless us, and cause His face to shine upon us” (Ps 67:1 NASB), to the advancement of God’s mission: “That Your way may be known on the earth, Your salvation among all nations. Let the peoples praise You, O God; Let all the peoples praise You” (Ps 67:2-3 NASB). Delitzsch explains how this most intimate revelation cannot help but bring a missional effect: “...the church desires for itself the unveiled presence of the light-diffusing loving countenance of its God.”⁸⁷ That blessing does not end with the psalmist because God’s blessing is uncontainable. “The more graciously God attests Himself to the church, the more widely and successfully does the knowledge of this God spread itself forth from the church over the whole earth.”⁸⁸

Landmark 5: Prophetic Witness – Community of Faith without Borders

In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take
firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say,
‘Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.’
--Zechariah 8:20-23 TNIV

The sentiments expressed in the Mosaic Covenant to the nations and idolatries are particularized in specific nations and eras through the prophets. The relationship of the people of God as “antithetical allies” takes dual form of scathing denunciation of

⁸⁷ F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes*, vol. 5, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1973), 240.

⁸⁸ Delitzsch, *Psalms*, 240.

idolatrous practices and announcing the coming of future salvation that will extend beyond Israel. Full scale judgment and salvation (Isa 1-32 and 40-66).

Religious pluralism receives consistent disdain among Israel's prophets, especially so when Israel was ensnared by them. The rich vocabulary used to describe idols and their worship points to a widely entrenched practice. Idols can be described as nothingness (Isa 41:29;66:3;Jer 8:19), hideous (Jer 50:38), shameful (Jer 11:13; Hos 9:10), dung (Ezek 16:36; 20:18), filth (Ezek 37:23; Nah 3:6), shadow (Dan 3:1), a fashioned figure (Isa 48:5), a form (Isa 45:16), statue (Jer 43:13), "sun-images" (Isa 17:8, "chambers of imagery" (Ezek 8:12) and carved image (Isa 44:10-20).⁸⁹ Motyer identifies two truths that are often repeated in the prophetic polemics against idols.

...that the idol was nothing, but that nevertheless there was a demonic spiritual force to be reckoned with, and that the idol therefore constituted a positive spiritual menace (Isa 44:6-20; 1 Cor 8:4; 10:19-20). Thus, the idol is nothing at all: man made it (Isa 2:8); its very composition and construction proclaims its futility (Isa 40:18-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20); its helpless bulk invites derision (Isa 46:1-2); it has nothing but the bare appearance of life (Ps 115:4-7). The prophets derisively named them *gillûlim* (Ezek 6:4, and at least 38 other times in Ezekiel) or 'dung pellets' (Koehler's *Lexicon*), and *'ēlîm*, 'godlets'.⁹⁰

Its seduction lay in its hidden power as well as the sense that one can control it. For "on the one hand, the idol is not really the deity but only a handle to use in dealing with the spirit, the real power behind the idol. On the other hand, it becomes so identified with the god that the two are hard to separate. The genius of the symbol is that it gives humans a way to manipulate their gods."⁹¹

⁸⁹ *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, s. v. "Idol," by M. G. Easton. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

⁹⁰ *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s. v. "Idolatry," by Alec Motyer (Leicester, England: Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

⁹¹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s. v. "Idol, Idolatry" (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, c1998), electronic ed.

One God, One Creed, One Community

The discussion so far has underscored the scope of the divine mission by examining the state of emergency facing an entire race of humanity in Genesis 1-11 and matching the scope of the pandemic crisis with the reach of the blessing, explicitly extending it to “all the families of the earth” (Gen 12:1-3). The agency entrusted to mediate that blessing to the world was one nation of God’s own making. Third, the Mosaic covenant underscored Israel’s distinctive character in the world. Its reach toward multicultural people not the same as wide indiscriminate absorption of multicultural values, offsetting indiscriminate demographic width with specific ideological distinction. These landmark events all express in different ways the international and multiethnic nature of the kingdom. They fall short, however, of mandating the creation of the MEC, anticipating only a general truth later to arrive in Christ that all believers will be united in one global family. It is Israel’s prophets who break new ground and cast a vision of a community of nations united in worship of the same God.

Micah

Micah, an early literary prophet (750-700 BC), saw the nations flocking to God’s temple to worship him along with the covenant community: “Peoples shall stream to it [Jerusalem], and many nations shall come and say: ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths’” (Mic 4:2). Nothing on the immediate horizons fostered such a sunny outlook. In his day, “the faithful have been swept from the land; not one upright person remains” (Mic 7:2 TNIV). His faith, though tested, does not waver: “But as for me, I watch in hope for the LORD; I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me (Mic

7:7 TNIV). Indomitable faith typifies those traveling on this highway of revelation.⁹² In the bleak absence of encouraging signs, his confidence recalled the character of the covenant-Maker with Abraham.⁹³

Isaiah

Isaiah (740-700 B.C.), a contemporary of Micah, was shown an inclusive vision of sweeping proportions. Archenemies of Israel will become brothers with Israel: "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (Isa 19:26). Privileged titles of intimate endearment – "my people, the work of my hands, my heritage" – previously reserved exclusively for the sons of Jacob, will now be whispered into the ears of Egyptians and the likes of Sennacherib. Walter Brueggemann conveys the magnitude of this:

All phrases that characteristically refer to Israel as God's beloved people – are redistributed so that Egypt and Assyria are also God's favored peoples. These lines are of immense importance because they show the vision of the OT reaching well beyond the ethnic parochialism to the world of the Gentiles, who are also cared for by God.⁹⁴

In Isaiah 19:18 profane tongues will "speak the same language of Canaan." How will this be possible? Something must transpire in the structure of revelation that will provide Israel's enemies access to the saving knowledge of her God and, in doing so, provide them entry into a single worshiping community. Such will be forthcoming: "The Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians" (Isa 19:21), so that those who once knew the Lord in judgment at the Exodus can know him in grace. New revelation will engender

⁹² "Do not gloat over me, my enemy! Though I have fallen, I will rise. Though I sit in darkness, The LORD will be my light" (Mic 7:8 TNIV).

⁹³ "Who is a God like you, who pardons sin and forgives the transgression of the remnant of his inheritance? You do not stay angry forever but delight to show mercy... You will be faithful to Jacob, and show love to Abraham, as you pledged on oath to our ancestors in days long ago" (Mic 7:18-20 TNIV).

⁹⁴ Walter Brueggemann, "Isaiah," in *The Life With God Bible* NRSV, ed. Richard J. Foster (NY: HarperCollins, 2005), 1009.

faith on a grander scale. The God who will make himself widely known will cleanse even enemy nations from their former idolatry (Isa 53:11). They too can be adopted into the covenant family with the same level of endearing intimacy that had been reserved for the original Hebrew sons and daughters.

The location in which the Lord will “make himself known” is hardly the place his covenant people might expect, in the Holy City of Jerusalem where the temple stood. Instead, this future light of salvation would dawn in the “land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali,” a place deemed in the eyes of the favored South as the land of utter “contempt” (Isa 9:1 NASB). This host, the compromised geography in the far North, “Galilee of the nations,” will become sanctified by its heavenly Visitor: “He [who] shall make it glorious!” That idolatrous Northern Kingdom, whom the Assyrians had dismantled, deported and later repopulated with a mixed breed was divinely chosen as the site to be favored in which “people who walked in darkness have seen a great light” (Isa 9:1-2). The nature of that light will consist in a person, a divine Son to be “given”⁹⁵ to whose name will be ascribed titles reserved strictly for Yahweh: “Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,”⁹⁶ and Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). This points to a Davidic king whose “authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom” (v 7). The character of his massive reign looks to be far more than imperialistic expansion, but a restored shalom. In contrast Edenic paradise which had ended abruptly by sin’s entrance, this reign of peace will be

⁹⁵ Alec J. Motyer notes that the Son of God, co-eternal with the Father, cannot be born. The “child” to be born is the son of Mary. Alec J. Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 103.

⁹⁶ Perhaps better rendered, “Father of Eternity,” the quintessential source of eternal life. See Motyer, *Isaiah*, 103.

endowed with permanence, "from this time onward and forever."⁹⁷

Two aspects of Isaiah's vision anticipate the character of the multiethnic church in the NT: its demographic composition and exclusive worship. Having identified its place and its person, what kind of community will this revelation produce? First, its span will be global, encompassing peoples beyond ethnic Israel. Eligibility in this revelation-formed family disregards hereditary factors altogether and will rest solely on whoever will "hold fast my covenant" (Isa 56:4, 6).⁹⁸ That roster of peoples drawn in "to your light" (Isa 60:3) will include not only foreign enemies, but even Israel's alienated half-brothers, the descendants of Ishmael who will come bearing gifts. Isaiah 60:6-7 (cf. Gen 25:12ff) names nations that are identified with Islam in the modern world:

A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord. All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered to you, the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you; they shall be acceptable on my altar, and I will glorify my glorious house.

Competing provincial ways and fierce national loyalties, however, raise the question of plausibility. What kind of force can make that happen? Given their long-standing hostility, on what basis will these nations hope to worship together? A voluntary in-gathering of this mix calls for a moral force with enough potency to dissolve centuries of interethnic and international turbulence. This leads to the second aspect of the MEC.

⁹⁷ Motyer comments on its sustained quality despite its wide expanse: "His kingdom will increase and occupy progressively all space until he rules over all. Government (*misra*) is princely reality, actual executive rule. The qualities which he perfectly embodies will not suffer loss or change by maladministration. ... Now as the princely rule spreads, peace spreads. It is an empire indeed but there is no imperialism, there is rule but no exploitation, rather the endless sharing of his own perfect 'fulfillment' in bringing those under his rule to perfection." Motyer, *Isaiah*, 103.

⁹⁸ Cf. what qualifies one as a true Jew according to Paul in Romans 2:28-29 and Philipians 3:3-4. Motyer writes, "They do not come 'contributing insights'; there is no thought that their religion is good enough for them or that everyone finds in his own gods his own way to heaven. They come rather to the truth about the Lord, to the *honor* for the name', i.e. to what he has revealed about himself (cf. 2:3). They are ready to submit to the God of another people, the *Holy One of Israel*... They are moved by the attractive *splendor* 'beauty' with which he has endowed his city." Motyer, *Isaiah*, 496.

Second, what Isaiah saw coming was more than peoples united, but the compelling object of their worship. This would be no celebration of multiculturalism to evolve in the latter days but of common praise to the same Lord. A transcendent allegiance will unite them so that “the foreigner [will be] joined to the LORD” (Isa 56:3).⁹⁹ The same God who, by his own love and grace, initiated a covenant with Abraham, blessing him with a single “seed” of innumerable descendants, will somehow and in some way break open that “seed” so that its grateful recipients of grace may become its conduit to others. This anticipates a time when history’s cyclical seasons and patterns will be interrupted with an advent, a divine appearance (Isa 9:6) on behalf of all his creation. In Isaiah 65:1 the *missio Dei* is explicit: “I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me; I was found by those who did not seek me. To a nation that did not call on my name, I said, ‘Here am I, here am I.’” While many commentators assign this passage to apostate Israel, Motyer contends that it includes the wider sweep of nations.¹⁰⁰

Finally, in chapter 66:18-24, Isaiah describes the God-centered global community in a “new heaven and new earth” (v 22). “From new moon to new moon, and from Sabbath to Sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord” (Isa 66:23).

Zephaniah

Next, the prophet Zephaniah (640-609 B.C.), last in line of the nine minor

⁹⁹ The inclusion of Gentile peoples must not be confused with the endorsement of Gentile ways (see Isa 60:8-9).

¹⁰⁰ Motyer writes, “The heart of the message is his self-revelation: Here I am, here I am – Behold me, behold me! The self-revelation broke new ground geographically but not theologically. Aimed at the hitherto unreached Gentiles, its objective was to bring them within the embrace of his name, i.e., within the bounds of his redeeming work and the revelation of himself as Redeemer (Exod. 3:15).” For his arguments, Motyer, *Isaiah*, 540f. “This approach to the nations is all of God, both in its inception (they did not ask for me) and in its outcome (‘I let myself be found’). ... We can seek only because he has first sought” (John 15:16). Motyer, *Isaiah*, 514.

prophets written before the Exile,¹⁰¹ sees a preparatory spiritual purging that will take place in the nations that will precede their inclusion with Israel: "At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord" (Zeph 3:9).

Zechariah

Finally, Zechariah (c. 520- 518 B.C.) foresaw a universal hunger for God as nations that had been previously unresponsive to Israel's God would come to experience spiritual hunger pangs for his presence. Souls desperately famished for an eternally satisfying fare will take the form of a mass migration in search of true Bread.

Many peoples and the inhabitants of many cities will come, and the inhabitants of one city will go to another and say, 'Let us go at once to entreat the LORD and seek the LORD Almighty. I myself am going.'

And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.

In those days ten people from all languages and nations will take firm hold of one Jew by the hem of his robe and say, 'Let us go with you, because we have heard that God is with you.' (Zech 8:20-23 TNIV)

This global ingathering will be followed by the arrival of a Messiah-King who will come "riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will proclaim peace to the nations" (Zech 9:9-10 TNIV). Significantly, in the common worship of this peace-King, Jews and Gentiles will find their unity: "The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and His name the only name" (Zech 14:9 TNIV)!

In wrapping up this lengthy historical marker, it would be easy to reduce its message to global salvation. A world gripped in darkness would see a great light, a beacon of divine grace, truth, kindness, mercy and justice. This heavenly luminary would take the form of an ordinary man and emerge from the family of Abraham and the royal lineage of David as Israel's Messiah. He will extend the invitation to the human family in

¹⁰¹ *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (1988), s. v. "Zephaniah," by D. A. Schneider.

its entirety, both great and small, without distinction of color, language, gender, or social station. But it does not end there. The zenith of that vision is that all who are drawn to this Messianic light would be grafted into the family of Abraham. Not only will they come as blessed individuals, but people integrated into one community, bound intimately through their common homage to one Creator, Redeemer and Lord. The nations will augment rather than replace Israel. The contribution made by these prophets, then, is that through Israel, God will not only reach the nations but will include them, forming one diverse faithful society.

Unfortunately, these prophetic forecasts failed to find sympathy with the majority in the covenant family. To a significant number, it seems, it was a bad idea. Not only was the thought of inclusion farfetched – Egyptians, Assyrians, Ishmaelites (!) – but their social inclusion not even desirable. Were not they, Israel, God's chosen, the exclusive sons of Abraham? God answers their protests with a question. Identifying himself as their "Maker," he asks: "Will you question me about my children, or command me concerning the work of my hands?" (Isa 45:11). Despite their boycott, the Lord's invitation to the nations stood firm: "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa 45:22). Flush with divine covenants and privileges, holy nationhood, prophetic vision and clear mandate to a global ministry, Israel gladly opened its hands to receive covenant blessings but refused to shoulder their missional calling. Instead, those called to bless the nations stifled its flow. In the fullness of time, a boundary-breaker would appear.

Landmark 6: Jesus – Includer, Peacemaker and Lord of All

In Jesus the centrifugal forces we have
detected in the Old Testament reach their point of explosion.

--Senior and Stuhlmueller

Jesus Christ is the forerunner to the multiethnic church and the groundbreaking culmination of the *missio Dei*. In his life he was the Includer, in his death the Peacemaker, and in his resurrection and ascension the Lord of all. Each of these plays a crucial role in shaping the life and mission of the MEC.

Life of Christ –The Includer

The life and ministry of Jesus took no detour from the path of previous covenants and prophetic promises, but he “crowned a historical process of redemption that had lasted not just centuries but millennia.”¹⁰² Where Israel had stalled in provincialism, Jesus cut a new path back to the very ones for whom the Abrahamic covenant was intended. Moving in opposite directions – Israel to the center in self-preservation¹⁰³ and Jesus to the circumference of universal mission – conflict would be inevitable as he moved to secure redemption for all.

Jesus, against the backdrop of first-century Judaism, was a radical includer. By that is meant that he sought out people who, for whatever reason, were deemed unfit and barred from the faith community. Jesus was no respecter of persons on the basis of conventional acceptance. He created a new community by crossing social, ethnic, gender and religious boundaries and redefining terms of belonging. So sweeping was

¹⁰² Andrew F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 72.

¹⁰³ Scott McKnight writes, “A majority of current scholars working on Jewish missionary activity agree that Judaism was not a missionary movement, did not have a missionary theology and only rarely involved itself in what may be called ‘universal proselytization.’ *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, s. v. “Gentiles, Gentile Mission,” by Scott McKnight (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000, electronic ed.).

the range of his inclusion that when widely compared against the philosophical luminaries of ancient Athens,¹⁰⁴ the major world religions,¹⁰⁵ and even the Old Testament itself, anthropologist Charles R. Taber could make the politically incorrect yet historically verifiable claim that:

Human rights is ... a unique contribution of Jesus of Nazareth to the human scene. The specifically unique contribution of Jesus was his categorical rejection of any and all of the limits human societies have placed on the dignity of the person, and of any and all bases for discrimination between human beings in dignity and therefore in rights.¹⁰⁶

Like no other, Jesus of Nazareth conferred dignity upon all human beings regardless of their station in life. Taber carefully documents striking contrasts to fallen society that, "even at its best, fails this standard."¹⁰⁷ All four Gospel accounts make this prominent.

Two caveats to the broad scope of Jesus' inclusion deserve special notice here. First, many cases involving Gentile people indicate a delayed inclusion. For example, in Matthew's Gospel Jesus instructs his disciples to evangelize only Jews and not Gentiles (Matt 10:5-6, 23). Against the larger backdrop of an explicit universal mission that Matthew records (e.g. Matt 28:19), however, these restrictive orders are meant to be

¹⁰⁴ "The ancient Greeks—especially the Athenians (particularly the Stoics, Plato, and Aristotle)—appealed to natural law and to the nature of humanity to ground ideas about a number of human rights. But when we look more closely, the democracy of Athens pertained only to a small minority of the population: free adult males. Women and children were explicitly excluded as being essentially chattel, and the majority of the population who were slaves was not even considered. Non-Greeks were "barbarians" and beneath contempt." Charles R. Taber, "In the Image of God: The Gospel and Human Rights," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* (July 2002): 98.

¹⁰⁵ Taber, "Gospel and Human Rights," *International Bulletin*, 98.

¹⁰⁶ Taber, "Gospel and Human Rights," *International Bulletin*, 98.

¹⁰⁷ He adds: "Discrimination as practiced universally can be simply Us versus Them (insiders versus outsiders), friends/allies versus enemies, male versus female, and old versus young. Most societies add, whether de jure or de facto, a variety of other considerations, such as wealth and poverty, class or caste, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Not so the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Building on, but radically extending, hints found in the Hebrew Law and Prophets, Jesus alone among all religious founders and leaders rejected all forms of discrimination and insisted that all human beings ought to be treated in exactly the same way. His own dealings with women, with children, with lepers and other ritually polluted people, and with foreigners radically undermined all the distinctions that human societies of his day unanimously institutionalized." Taber, "Gospel and Human Rights," *International Bulletin*, 99.

understood as temporary. Scott McKnight notes that while Jesus “restricts himself in some sense to Jews (cf. Matt 15:24), this same Jesus is bent on a more universal scope to the mission of God’s kingdom.”¹⁰⁸ The Gospel of Luke, likewise, pointed to the vast frontiers of Jesus’ inclusion through the Spirit-prompted speech of an elderly Jew at Jesus’ infancy. Cradling the babe, he heralded an astonishing “salvation” promising to reach well beyond Israel, a “light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:32). Embodying that inspired utterance, both the location of Jesus’ hometown in Nazareth and the start of his public ministry in “Galilee of the Gentiles”¹⁰⁹ fulfill Isaiah’s earlier prophecy (Isa 9:1) and recorded by Matthew, “Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light...” (Matt 4:15-16).¹¹⁰ His forerunner, John the Baptist, warns the crowds, most of them Abraham’s descendants, that the doorway into the kingdom of God will not be through natural pedigree or favored ethnic advantage, but personal repentance (Luke 3:8-9).

The second caveat is that broad inclusion for Jesus does not imply his acceptance of universalist premises that all will be saved. Matthew cites a significant

¹⁰⁸ McKnight, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*, electronic ed. Matthew’s Gospel is the most Jewish of the four yet its universal scope is undeniable. “Thus the first to worship are the magi (Matt 2:1-12), who become descendants of Abraham (Matt 1:1); Jesus’ dwelling in Galilee fulfills the dream of the light of Israel shining on all nations (Matt 4:12-16). The birds of the air (read “Gentiles”) will nest in Israel’s tree (Matt 13:13-32; cf. 21:33-46; 24:14), just as Jesus himself evangelizes some Gentiles (Matt 8:5-13; 15:21-28). The centurion at the cross is the first to confess Jesus as Son of God without being rebuked, and he is a Gentile (Matt 27:54).” McKnight, *Dictionary of the Later New Testament*.

¹⁰⁹ Historian Paul Barnett writes, “His home was not the sacred temple-city, Jerusalem, the world center for the rabbinic academies, but Nazareth in Galilee, a region surrounded by Greek states and permeated by Hellenism. It is appropriate that a message that was to be taken to the Gentile world should be centered on one who was nurtured and raised in Galilee of the Gentiles.” Paul Barnett, *Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity: A History of New Testament Times* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 105; quoted in Paul Curtiss DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, Karen Chai Kim, and George Yancey, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (NY, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.

¹¹⁰ Barnett writes, “The diverse mix of people in Galilee reflected the demographics of much of the Roman Empire. The Galilee in which Jesus grew up included Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Macedonians, Persians, Romans, Syrians, and indigenous Canaanites...” Barnett cited by DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 15.

number of instances in which he explicitly bars entrance for individuals to either the kingdom of God or from his circle of followers. In each of these Matthew makes clear the basis for their refusal ranging from religious hypocrisy (Matt 3:7; 6:1-6, 16-18; 12:34), dubious reliance upon heritage rather than faith in divine revelation (Matt 3:9-10; 8:11-2), charlatan prophets (Matt 7:15-23), obsessive preoccupation with mundane existence (Matt 8:13-22), spiritual numbness (Matt 11:16-19), spitefulness (Matt 12:1-7), deafness (Matt 13:3-9),¹¹¹ those put off by Jesus (Matt 13:57-8) with zeal for tradition instead of for God (Matt 15:1-14), sign-seekers rather than authentic inquirers (Matt 16:1-12), the duplicitous who entice others to do wrong (Matt 18:7-8) and lovers of wealth (Matt 19:21-4).

Despite the indiscriminate breadth of Jesus' invitation, "Come to me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt 11:28), it is the Son who reveals both the Father (Matt 11:27) and defines the criteria of acceptance (Matt 12:24-32). Entrance into his rest fastens upon faith in God's dramatic appearance through the extraordinary words and actions of his incarnate Son. Welcomed into that intimate circle of respite in the Son, therefore, are all who, having witnessed God's breakthrough revelation of mercy and power on behalf of the broken, sinful and oppressed, make an open admission of personal need and turn in faith to Christ. By contrast, the company of the excluded, despite seeing these identical extraordinary signs and wonders they, nevertheless, for reasons of self-sufficiency, religious pride or vested interest refused the soul-rest that his grace could have provided (Matt 11:20-24; 20:22; 21:23, 28-32). Such criteria of faith alone in God's front-and-center grace upends any grounds for snobbish elitism on the part of the inner-circle as well as charges of unfairness by the outcast,

¹¹¹ The parable of the soils indicates that in matters of special revelation equal distribution is not synonymous with equal reception. Miraculous signs and the preaching of the gospel enable yet fall short of guaranteeing faith (Matt 13:3-9).

despite protests to the contrary that will carry no weight in the end (John 1:11; Rom 10:2-3; 2 Thess 1:6-10; cf. Matt 7:15-23).

His Universal Impulse

Jesus boldly put the impartial love of his Father over the provincial preferences of his peers. His first sermon transcended provincial sentiments held by the fellow-citizens of his hometown, recalling two early prophets who had singled out a widow from Sidon and a leper from Syria to receive special gifts of divine mercy while overlooking the many widows and lepers within Israel (Luke 4:26-27). Despite the sacred canon from which these events were drawn, his audience deemed them offensive and incendiary, inciting them to violent “rage” (Luke 4:26). As a pastor, this episode is a reminder that a congregation is not a democracy that votes people in or out of the church on the basis of personal preferences.

Jesus’ wider pursuit of the nations must not be construed as an abandonment of the covenant people, the “seed of Abraham,” whom God originally favored with blessing. Such would have called divine faithfulness into question. When Jesus commissioned the Twelve, he instructed them, “Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans, but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matt 10:5-6 NASB).¹¹² Jesus did not reject his own people but simply rewarded faith wherever he found it.¹¹³

¹¹² McKnight writes, “Matthew’s design to show that from the very beginning, though the Jews are the privileged people and remain so..., the gospel moves from them to the whole world (Matt 28:16-20). Like Paul’s very practice, Matthew, Mark and Luke each see a particularism (to the Jews first) that leads to a universalism...” McKnight, *Dictionary*.

¹¹³ For example, Jesus healed the son of a widow in Nain (Luke 7:11), the slave of a Roman centurion whose faith as a foreigner exceeded that of anyone in Israel (Luke 7:2-10) and a demoniac from Gerasenes (Luke 8:26-39). He also raised up the daughter of a leader in a local synagogue (Luke 8:40-56). Jesus would not countenance ethnic and provincial cruelties even when hurled by his own disciples (Luke 9:54-55).

His Mobile Presence

How can the manifest presence of God be made accessible to people on the margins? Was it possible for Jesus to include the outsider without a personal encounter? Where could that take place? Beneath these tactical questions is a theological one. How are we to understand the prophetic announcement of a day when nations would stream to the temple in Zion, God's dwelling place? (Ps 132:13; 9:11; 74:2; 76:2; Joel 3:17). The direction reverses from the world coming to the temple, as envisioned by Old Testament prophets, to the temple repositioning itself in culture and, thus, opened up to all nations.¹¹⁴ The OT was aware that the divine habitation cannot be "circumscribed,"¹¹⁵ confined to a single place (Isa 66:1; cf. Deut 4:7; 1 Kgs 8:27; Ps 145:18; Acts 7:48; 17:24). In the prologue of John, that divine habitation found a new location in the embodiment of the divine Logos (John 1:1, 14). It was understood that Jesus "tabernacled" in society at large not as an end in itself but to make known the true God (John 17:3; 1 Tim 2:5; 1 John 5:20).¹¹⁶ The glory revealed through this "temple" was made visible and tangible (John 1:14, 2:11; cf. 1 John 1:1-3) by going to people rather than the people coming to it, thus providing access to God's presence beyond the stationary confines of the temple precincts. Jesus was the new temple of God (Mark

¹¹⁴ McKnight states, "We find in New Testament times what we do not find in Old Testament times: missionaries going out to proclaim the Gospel. They can do so now without infringing the Biblical principle of the gathering-together of mankind to a Centre. The Worship of God through the Messiah, in Spirit and the Truth, is not localized at the geographical Jerusalem; it can happen now in every place where the ecclesia, Israel, is. ... Wherever the *ecclesia* is, there mankind can come to Zion, the Zion from which *Torah* goes forth, and the world of the LORD from Jerusalem. The Centre of Unity for mankind is Jerusalem in the mystical sense: it is the Messiah and His Kingdom." McKnight, *Dictionary*, 231-2.

¹¹⁵ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s. v. "Temple" (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

¹¹⁶ Robert Webber writes, "Jesus recognized that the temple had to be knocked down and that it could not be replaced in its familiar form. God never agreed to have a permanent dwelling built for himself, and the various temples had to perish. God did promise that he would build a house for himself from the lineage of David. This promise had now come to fulfillment in Jesus...Hence the temple had reached its end and goal in the person of the incarnate Son (John 1:14; 2:19-22). Webber, *Library of Christian Worship*, vol. 1, *Biblical Foundations*, 103.

13:1-2; 14:58; see John 2:13-22).¹¹⁷ In the days of Moses, the Tent of Meeting through which God's Shekinah glory was manifest on earth had been toted on wooden poles. During the time of Herod, it had been built into a temple with impressively cut stones. Now Immanuel, God with us, carried that glory on ordinary feet so that the footprints of God could be traced to leper colonies, graveyards and other places considered off-limits. The good news of the kingdom traveled widely (Luke 8:4-8, 11-15), the light of truth illuminating darkness for those living far from as well as close to the temple (Luke 8:16-18) so that society's most marginalized could find their way into God's kingdom. Jesus' adamant refusal to circumscribe his mission to a single location put divine encounter within the fingertips of the masses. Negatively, his righteous ire cleared the way in the Temple courts against those who dared hinder outsiders from the privilege of prayerfully approaching God. They did so by turning "a house of prayer for all the nations" into a "robbers' den" (Mark 11:17 NASB). Jesus' fiery zeal against those obstructing access through the familiar path to God found its proactive counterpart in cutting a new trail leading to God altogether. Seekers found Jesus (Luke 4:42-44) precisely because he sought them out first. He was the fisherman doing the catching and not the reverse (Luke 5:10-11), constantly moving toward population pools long forgotten by the mainstream.

The point is that Jesus made the presence and grace of God accessible not only by what he said but by where he went. The "Spirit of the Lord" rested upon Jesus for the expressed purposes of "bringing" (Luke 4:18) divine favors to those in desperate need. To the Spirit he credits the effectiveness of his preaching (see 3:22; 4:1, 14; Acts 10:37) but we must not overlook his mobility. The dual actions of going out as well as speaking

¹¹⁷ Temple imagery is employed in reference to Christ's atonement (See Heb 9:11-12). B. Chilton writes "The Temple in Jerusalem has in Hebrews been replaced by a purely ideological construct. The true high priest has entered once for all (Heb 9:12) within the innermost recess of sanctity, so that no further sacrificial action is necessary or appropriate." B. Chilton in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1182.

up made him a transforming force to be reckoned with, for Jesus was the itinerant, “proclaiming” as well as “bringing the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 8:1). Unlikely connections became the norm so that malefactors could meet Righteousness, wanderers the Seeker, lost sheep the Good Shepherd, and in all with equal results, profound happiness. The religious establishment preferred more kosher homogeneous environments and had sent the marginalized into shameful hiding. The Son of God went to them and drew them out of the shadows. The church that engages in proclamation behind pulpits without presence among the masses commits a serious digression from the pattern of Jesus Christ.

His Credibility

The congruity between Jesus’ life and teachings earned him credibility. By illustrating in life his Father’s indiscriminate love, the unconventional inclusivity of his teaching was spared ambiguity, made vividly clear and poignant: “Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, and pray for those who abuse you” (Luke 6:27-28). The universal love of God, he showed, undifferentiating and lavish in its distribution, stands in stark contrast to the calculated kindnesses and preferential treatments practiced in society at large (Luke 6:32-36; cf. John 3:16). His community is comprised of those who forgive freely (Luke 6:37-38), removing the log of judgmentalism from their vision, including that which arises from derogatory racial associations so that they can fairly apply moral judgments (Luke 6:41-43).

His New Definitions

Jesus defined “family” as the kinship of the faithful. This kindred circle is bonded by an obedience birthed by faith in God (Luke 8:19-21)¹¹⁸ and composed of all who listen

¹¹⁸ Cf. how he causes family division in Luke 12:52-53.

to God (Luke 10:16). In a similar way, Jesus redefines neighbor along new lines for his audience. To illustrate the meaning of “neighbor,” Jesus as a first-century Jew made the Samaritan the hero of his story (Luke 10:33) as well as the noble exception among a healed but ungrateful leper colony (Luke 17:11-19). So what constitutes one’s neighbor? Jesus extends it to include: “... all humankind and insisted that the two Great Commandments applied to all; and he taught his disciples to love even their enemies. These surely were among the reasons why Jesus’ peers found him troublingly subversive and therefore condemned him.”¹¹⁹ Significantly, the sending of the Twelve apostles (Luke 9:1-6) and later of the Seventy (Luke 10:1-12) into the society at large showed both the sequential priority and global scope of the *missio Dei*. The gospel must first go to the twelve tribes of Israel and, by matching the number listed in the roster of nations in Genesis 10, extended widely to all peoples. Jesus came for all.

His Table Fellowship

To what length would Jesus go to include the outsider? He would sit at their tables. To truly grasp this requires that we understand table fellowship through the eyes of his contemporaries. Scot McKnight writes, “At the time of Jesus, table customs could be used to measure one’s commitment to the Torah.” What did one’s choice of dinner guests say about him or her? “For the Pharisees, the table was supposed to talk, but it was to say “kosher” and “purity.” For them, the table became a wall between the observant and nonobservant—not because they were mean, but because they were zealous in their commitment to how they thought the Torah should be applied.”¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ Taber, “Image of God,” *International Bulletin*, 98.

¹²⁰ Scot McKnight, *The Jesus Creed: Loving God, Loving Others* (Brewster, MASS: Paraclete Press, 2004), 35. Theologian Albert Nolan adds, “It would be impossible to overestimate the impact these meals must have had upon the poor and the sinners. By accepting them as friends and equals Jesus had taken away their shame, humiliation and guilt. By showing them that they mattered to him as people he gave them a sense of dignity and released them from captivity. The physical contact which he must have had with them

If the table was a wall to the Pharisees, what was it to Jesus? We catch a clue when he invites himself to the home of Zacchaeus the tax collector, despised for his greed and graft (Luke 19:1, 5). The transformative force unleashed by Jesus' act lies at the heart of the gospel. In this case, the over-the-top gesture of unmerited kindness on the part of Jesus elicited an extravagant repentance on the part of Zacchaeus (Luke 19:8).

Kindness is designed to move wayward people to repentance (Rom 2:4).

What then does the table mean to Jesus? "... the table envisions a new society, and that means that the table is a boundary breaker and grace giver – a place where we can see what God can do when people are restored to fellowship with Abba. The table envisions because it is a door that opens and invites and includes. As such, the table creates a society."¹²¹ For this, his opponents tagged Jesus a "glutton and drunkard," a weighty charge with legal implications.¹²² Jesus' practice was to include everyone at the table and expand the extended family to outsiders.

His Enemy Love

No teaching of Jesus captures his message of reconciliation and provides a more cogent basis for the MEC than what we find in Luke 6:28-36 (and its parallel, Matt 5:43-48). And no lifestyle will distinguish the church in society with a divine imprint like that enjoined here. Jesus raises the ante of love by expanding the circle from the different to the difficult, including not merely cultural oddities but historic enemies. In this author's Wesleyan theological tradition, this teaching occupies a central place as the doctrine of

when reclining at the table and which he obviously never dreamed of disallowing must have made them feel clean and acceptable." Albert Nolan, *Jesus before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 39; quoted in DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 17.

¹²¹ McKnight, *Jesus Creed*, 39.

¹²² It was the language of exasperated parents of a delinquent child who, in their desperation, simply gave up on their offspring and handed him or her over to authorities with the power of capital punishment. McKnight, *Jesus Creed*, 35.

perfect love or sometimes called Christian perfection.¹²³ While some have misapplied Jesus' imperative to "be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matt 5:48 NIV) as a standard of moral flawlessness, the context is clear that Jesus is not talking about individual spiritual attainment but radical cross-cultural inclusion. People normally gravitate towards those like themselves, Jesus says, loving and caring for their own kind. This practice, the homogenous unit principle (HUP), carries with it a higher likelihood of reciprocity in which one is loved back in return. Such a pattern is not necessarily evil per se – people must care for their own – yet its scope is profoundly unlike that of God. Not only does it easily fall into cronyism but it contains no moral influence that can befriend one's enemy and mitigate the cycle of violence. Clearly, the way of Jesus is the way of the Father who he perfectly reveals.

This prescribed ethic, despite its risks of double rejection by enemies and friends alike, reenacts the way of the cross. God's kindness opens doors to reverse hostile relationships with adversaries (Rom 2:4). It reflects the aggressive nature of God's agape that refuses to delay its advances, waiting for the enemy to show signs of change.¹²⁴ While agitating the status quo by the command that his church break out of its HUP shell, obedience to Jesus' command of perfect love sets in motion God's inclusive agape throughout society through the border-crossing MEC. Rather than

¹²³ From the Wesleyan perspective, the adjective "Christian" determines the content of "perfection," distinguishing it from alternate views of absoluteness, flawlessness or beyond improvement. It expresses optimism of grace as the soteriological summit on this side of death to which all antecedent motions point. It stands in opposition to both sinful license and soul-killing legalism by stressing a heart perfected in agape love by the indwelling fullness of the Spirit. Perfect is understood through the interpretive lens of the Eastern fathers such as Macarius as a dynamic force pushing onward rather than a spent one having arrived! It rests upon justification by faith, shifting the focus from works-based righteousness that comes from the law to grace-based faith leading to joyful service (Phil 3:7-11; Gal 5:6). For example, see George A. Maloney, S.J. ed. *Pseudo-Macarius: The Fifty Spiritual Homilies and the Great Letter*, trans. George A. Maloney (NY: Paulist Press, 1992); William M. Greathouse, "Sanctification and the Christus Victor Motif in Wesleyan Theology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*. 7 (Spring, 1972): 47-59.

¹²⁴ For example, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8 NIV).

simply gravitating instinctively into unmixed social groupings, followers of Jesus intentionally cross over into relationships with greater risks but higher yield.

Jesus' inclusive teachings and actions became a living preamble anticipating his ultimate act of embracing the alienated. A painful reality remained that geographic proximity in which God was brought near through the embodied Immanuel falls short of reconciliation and calls for a more radical solution. Now we must look at the final answer to humanity's problem of spiritual and social alienation, one healing the primary barrier to authentic community and provides the MEC with its most necessary basis.

Cross of Christ – The Peacemaker

How does the death of the Messiah, the Son of God, reverse the disruptions and conflicts in the human family (Gen 3-11) so that an inclusive community of reconciled persons can emerge? This question is raised in a way that seeks to understand the relationship of reconciliation to ecclesiology. Reconciliation of broken relationships through the crucifixion of Christ constitutes the soteriological heart of the MEC. More specifically, it is the dual nature of God's reconciling work that creates and sustains multiethnic community. It establishes a new relation of peace with God and with other human beings, even when the latter is complicated by relationships with groups involving longstanding strife or opposition. In fact, by its very nature, does not "reconnecting of those who have parted" constitute the heart of reconciliation? Typically, a total stranger is not the one with whom one must either settle an old score or forgive. Reconciliation means to become "conciliatory again" and implies establishing an earlier peaceful relationship. Most precisely, its power lies in what it removes, eliminating historic walls that for decades, centuries or sometimes millennia have imposed themselves between individuals, cultures and nations. For followers of Christ, the call to forgive and make peace with adversaries is unquestionably taught by Jesus as a tenet of discipleship.

The cross of the Messiah represents the total dissolution of two immovable walls of separation and in their place two unfailing bridges for authentic closeness. The first wall to collapse was vertical, the barrier dividing sinful humanity and a holy God.¹²⁵ Matthew's passion declares that at the moment of Jesus' death "the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom" (Matt 27:51 NASB; cf. Mark 13:15). That thick curtain¹²⁶ had been imposed for one purpose: "the veil shall serve for you as a partition between the holy place and the holy of holies" (Exod 26:33-34 NASB; cf. Heb 9:3) thus barring unsanctioned access to a holy God. So what message does the veil's dramatic rending at the exact moment that Jesus took his last breath convey? It proclaims loud and clear that the One who suffered that fate was no martyr of good intentions, but an acceptable atoning sacrifice for human sin. And by means of that sacrifice, the way into the Most Holy Place has now been opened up for all through his death. All that had blocked entry into the divine Presence is gone forever so that "by the blood of Jesus" those formerly alienated from God "have confidence to enter the holy place...by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, his flesh..." (Heb 10:19). That simultaneous rending for flesh and curtain meant "an accomplished redemption!"¹²⁷

We come now to the second wall, one protruding viciously on the human landscape. This is the mental and spiritual barrier of enmity that tragically divides

¹²⁵ The nature of sin and the disruption it caused was fundamentally personal (Ps 51:4; Luke 15:21, etc.), representing an affront to God.

¹²⁶ Charles L. Feinberg describes this curtain: "The veil was made of variegated material embroidered with cherubim, draped over four pillars of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, and supported by four silver bases. The screen was of the same material as the screen at the entrance to the outer court (Exod 27:16). It was suspended from golden hooks on five pillars of acacia wood, overlaid with gold, and supported by bronze bases." Charles L. Feinberg, "The Tabernacle," in *The Complete Library of Christian Worship*, Vol. I: *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, ed. Robert E. Webber (Peabody, MASS: Henderson Publishers, 1993), 115.

¹²⁷ Feinberg, *Christian Worship*, 116.

persons and groups within the human family. Does the cross answer this horizontal barrier to authentic community among those divided by ethnic hatred, somehow recreating connecting bonds where hostilities have imposed impassable boundaries? By what forces are estranged groups reunited? These questions drive a close examination of the range of meaning of the term reconciliation. In everyday parlance it “denoted a change from a state of enmity to one of friendship, the healing of a quarrel....a radical change occurs in which an intimate and personal relationship is renewed. There is the suggestion of a real friendship, first existing, then broken, and finally restored.”¹²⁸

Curtiss Paul DeYoung explains its use in the NT in his classic work *Reconciliation*: “Being put into friendship with God and each other, (2) radical change and transformation of a relationship, and (3) restoration of harmony.” Used sparingly in the Bible, it becomes “the most powerful way of expressing the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.” It eliminates disturbing distance between significant others by acknowledging a problem has ruptured the relationship and then invests what is necessary to move toward intimacy by restoring what had been broken. It is expressed “only in personal terms, whether we recall Christ’s obedience to God or the believer’s response to all that reconciliation involves as a vital, loving relationship set up with persons always in view.”¹²⁹ To be reconciled to God then means:

... to move from estrangement to friendship. It means being changed completely. All animosity and bitterness are removed. Reconciliation comes to us from God as a divine gift. Until we are at peace with God, we will not experience life in its

¹²⁸ Harold Dietmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977), 195; quoted by Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge – Our Only Hope*, (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977), 44.

¹²⁹ Ralph Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study in Paul’s Theology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981), 109; quoted in DeYoung, *Reconciliation*, 44.

fullness. Reconciliation is a process of healing that leads to freedom and liberation.¹³⁰

Risen and Ascended – The Lord of All

Peter's first sermon at Pentecost fused an unprecedented feat with a peerless identity, declaring "God raised him [Jesus] from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death" (Acts 2:24 TNIV) which gave unmistakable meaning to "God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2:36 TNIV). The lordship of Christ, carries two significant implications for the MEC: Christ's total supremacy and our complete submission.

Total Supremacy

The Lordship of Christ means that he is Master of all. It involves more than a title of respect, but ascribes to him deity (John 20:28; Phil 2:6), universal supremacy (Acts 10:36, Rom 10:12; 14:8; 1 Cor 8:6), triumph over death (Rom 10:9; 14:9; Eph 1:20-2; Col 2:10, 15), the final word in judgment (1 Cor 4:5; 2 Tim 4:1, 8) and sole authority (1 Tim 6:15). To be "Lord" means to lead, vested with the legitimate right to command and to expect obedience: "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and do not do what I say" (Luke 6:46 TNIV)? Limited supremacy as a tribal or national deity would have meant restricted reign, one hemming his discipling mandate within tighter boundaries. Such could not be. As death-defying conqueror over the grave, Jesus, fully aware that "all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me," commands his church to disciple all nations (Matt 28:18), a mission field without borders.

The Lordship of Christ extends salvation comprehensively to include deliverance from the dominion of darkness into the realm of light (Col 1:13). His authority over demonic powers that allowed him free access into demonic regions without fear of

¹³⁰ DeYoung, *Reconciliation*, 46.

defilement by rival powers in the process carries implications into today's church. Is it not safe to say that those serving in his name may also freely engage with people and in homes that are captivated by rival deities without fearing contagion? The recognition that the one living in us is the Lord unequal in power elicits considerable confidence and enables free movement without fears of spiritual contamination.

Because Jesus is the Lord of all, he transcends and transforms cultures, realigning beliefs and practices with those of his kingdom. A MEC where multiple cultures coexist under the Christ's Lordship perhaps has an advantage over monocultural congregations by the way in which community-building practices of one subgroup can offer an exemplary corrective to what is lacking in another. When a large number of Burmese Christians crowded for hours around the bed of one of their young mothers in grief over the loss of a parent, offering prayers, singing hymns and sharing tears, this Anglo pastor witnessed community at a depth seldom practiced in his individualistically minded culture.

Unreserved Submission by His Church

Christ's exclusive claims to Lordship impacts congregational life in three specific ways: First, the reign of God rescues the doctrine of salvation from individualistic preoccupation and involves citizens of the kingdom in bringing about societal change. His lordship calls the church to pray "Your kingdom come; your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven" and personalizes the pattern of his submission, "Not my will, but yours be done." Further, it prevents subordinating Jesus to the role of serving consumer comforts. As Lord, Jesus has the rights to one's personal resources, plans and life patterns, a high demand enabled only by divine assistance; for "no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor 12:2).

Second, the church under the Lordship of Christ offers him their loyalty. A wide range of NT texts posit the basis for Christian fellowship in a common allegiance to one Lord rather than in shared natural affinity. These clearly state that “you cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons too” and “you cannot have a part in both the Lord’s table and the table of demons” (1 Cor 10:21). For “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another in love” (Gal 5:13). Our obedience includes our compliance to the Lord’s great commission to make Christlike disciples in the nations (Matt 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:45-8; John 20:21-2). Fellowship with God and with other believers are intimately connected. For “if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (1 John 1:7). And “whoever loves his brother lives in the light” (1 John 2:10). Loving other believers achieves what religious duty cannot do; it verifies one’s close connection to God. For “if we love one another, God lives in us” (1 John 4:12). In practical terms, shared devotion to Christ bonds believers at a deeper level than the possession of shared culture. Congregational unity finds its basis in neither the shared ethnicity nor socioeconomic equality of its members, but from obedience to the values and commands of Christ (2 Cor 6:14-16). Differences in race and custom drop to secondary importance in light of the common direction of their obedience. That is, Anglos casting their lot with Christ will discover that African Americans, Hispanic brothers or Bhutanese immigrants who are doing likewise will experience closeness at a depth greater than with other Anglos who have not. The tight connection to Christ will override thick accents, offensive cuisine choices and patterns of thought. While often laborious, these challenges remind believers they belong to a fellowship of the cross. Here, as John Bright reminds us, “there is no glib dismissal of all the tangled problems of race and

class. It does no good to pretend they are not there.¹³¹ Discomfort serves as a comforting reminder that the fact our spiritual unity precedes, exceeds and propels our manifestation of it (Eph 4:4).

Third, a church under the lordship of Christ adopts his pattern of life by enrolling in the school of discipleship. The Gospel according to Matthew equates calling Jesus “Lord” and taking up his pattern as a disciple.¹³² The incarnate Christ becomes the curriculum and the Holy Spirit the energy. We become his protégé. What we see Jesus doing, we emulate. With whom does he eat and engage in conversation (Mark 2:15-16)? How did he treat the poor, the opposite sex, those sinful and the lost (Matt 15:21-28; Mark 5:1-2; Luke 7:1-10; 10:30-37; John 4:45)? If the church emulates Jesus, it cannot help but reach out and include people on the edges of society, across culture and ethnicity as Jesus did.

Without adopting Christ’s pattern, the MEC will likely lose steam before coming to fruition. Submission to his Lordship, however, will hasten its formation and sustain its longevity. His grace will reduce frustrations that arise in cross-cultural conversations and irritations over culturally-formed preferences which are certainly no respecter of congregations.

¹³¹ Bright writes, “But this much is meant, and meant plainly: whatever divisions exist in society, and whatever may be the right solution of them, within the body of Christ such divisions have no relevancy whatever... (1 Cor 12:13)... And what is more, what is not so because we kindly agree to have it so; but because all of Christ’s people are servants of the same Lord, fellow citizens of the same Kingdom, heirs of the same hope. If we are in Christ, we do not need to be made one; we are one. If we refuse to be one, and to that degree to which we refuse, we are not members of his Church.” John Bright, *The Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 264.

¹³² Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt write, “the term *mathetes* [disciple], which occurs only in the first five books of the New Testament, we find seventy-three times in Matthew, but only forty-six times in Mark and thirty-seven times in Luke... In Matthew, discipleship is defined as keeping Jesus’ commands or words (19:17; 28:18-20).” Ben Witherington III and Darlene Hyatt, “Matthew,” in *The Life With God Bible* NRSV, ed. Richard J. Foster (NY: HarperCollins, 2005), NT section, 10.

Landmark 7: The Spirit – Inclusive Community Begun and Sustained

In the book of Acts no one had to change in order to receive the gospel. It was the church that had to change in order to give the gospel.
—Samuel Wilson

Can provincially-minded people change? What chances are there for deeply ingrained racist attitudes to be expunged or for wide-angle lenses to replace provincial narrowness? How can distaste for certain groups of people give way to genuine affection? What unique contribution does the Spirit make toward advancing the goal expressed in the Abrahamic covenant, predicted by select prophets and fulfilled in the inclusive life, sacrificial death and indomitable resurrection of Jesus? How does the Spirit make the MEC possible? In short, the Holy Spirit forms the body of Christ as life-giver and advances the mission of the church as change Agent.

Where the life and ministry of Jesus Christ provide the MEC with its inclusive template, it is the Holy Spirit who engraves his pattern into the contours of its corporate life and mission. Where Christ set the standard, the Spirit supplies the power. No one is naturally Christlike. Christ, as we have just seen, constantly moved to the margins, reconnecting the disconnected, seeking people who are far from God, and replacing old criteria of belonging through ethnicity or social standing with a new touchstone of faith and obedience to God. Yet he passes the torch to leaders who were just the opposite, fiercely ethnocentric, nationalistic, and competitive. They too moved to the margins, but their borders were far closer to their own kind. Mission requires change, but of whom? Missiologist Samuel Wilson said, "In the book of Acts, no one had to change in order to receive the gospel; it was the church that had to change in order to give the gospel."¹³³

¹³³ Harold E. Dollar wrote, "Luke shows that the theological challenge of the Gentile mission is not the reluctance of the Gentiles to respond to the gospel but the reluctance of the Jews to preach to them. Consequently, the 'conversion' of the messenger must come before the conversion of those who need the message." Harold E. Dollar, *A Biblical-Missiological Exploration of the Cross-Cultural Dimensions in Luke-Acts* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1993), 184-85; quoted in Dean Flemming ,

Identifying what those changes might be to facilitate mission might actually be easier than apprehending a dynamic that is capable of altering the nature of the church itself. That is, what force can form an organic community out of a collection of individuals, people with separate agendas, ethnic identities, ambitions, party loyalties and religious traditions? Only then it seems, after establishing a corporate identity, will the church be prepared to take the gospel beyond the frontiers of its homeland as well as to receive new converts from different cultures and ethnicities into its fellowship. This brings us to the work of the Spirit that engenders a new community as well as engineers its mission.

Pivotal Movements of the Spirit

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she was going to bear a son, her perplexity revealed her innocence: "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (Luke 1:34). The answer to her quandary is the same that is offered to anyone who receives an assignment that outlandishly exceeds his/her means of implementation. In this case, the formation of a church out of a wide mixture of nationalities and cultures, colors, languages, customs and even ideas about what church should look like. "How can this be, since we are so different?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:35). As with Mary, so it was with the church. The answer given by Jesus to the apostles echoed the angel to his mother: it will take a new inhabitation. Though he will physically vacate them, they will not be left to their own wits in this venture but will be indwelt, accompanied, empowered and guided by the promised Holy Spirit (John 14:16-28; 15:26; 16:5-11; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4).

Contextualization in the New Testament: Patterns for Theology and Mission (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 37.

Pentecost: The New Community of the Enthroned Christ and the Dethroned Self Formed through the Indwelling Spirit

Just as a miracle of conception was necessary to produce a son without a human father, so another intervention of corporate generation must precede the formation of his church. That sequel occurred in a divine moment on a historic day, the Jewish festival of Pentecost, with the descent of the Holy Spirit on a collection of 120 individual followers of Christ into a community of the Spirit (Acts 2:1-4, 17-18, 33, 38). The transcendence of its birth brought immediate shape to its corporate life. Its logic-defying hallmarks became its new norm (Acts 2:42-47). If the book of Acts teaches anything, it is that the MEC grows out of a community that is divinely engendered. Why is this important? Timothy Tennent put his finger on the issue:

The problem with evangelicals is that we have made the church only instrumental – doing things: preaching, evangelizing, etc. and the church has no ontological grounding! Thus, the gospel stops at the resurrection and Christ. This cut out Pentecost, the work of the Spirit. Thus, we lose the grounding for incarnational reconciliation.¹³⁴

Paul expressed the church's ground of being in concrete terms: "So we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body – whether Jews or Gentiles, slave or free – and we were all given the one Spirit to drink" (1 Cor 12:12-13 TNIV). The creative source of the MEC, fusing a wide assortment of peoples into one body from head to toe, is power from on high. Every strategy GRIF attempted, even after being convinced of this new direction, failed. We learned early on how the formation of an MEC out of a homogenously populated congregation, while calling for strategic planning, cannot be reduced to it. The MEC is spawned rather than manufactured and emerges when human strategies follow divine means of the Spirit through the Word. That word reached back to the first landmark event of the Abrahamic covenant. Now "There is neither Jew nor

¹³⁴ The author is indebted to Timothy Tennent for this poignant insight written in the margins of an unpublished paper, Joseph P. Knight, "Project 1: Literature Review: Fostering Community in a Multiethnic Church," Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, August 20, 2007, 61.

Gentile, neither slave nor free, neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed and heirs according to promise" (Gal 3:27-29 TNIV).

Abraham...Christ [Spirit]...Church. The ontology of the MEC expresses itself in concrete metaphors rather than philosophical categories: Christ's body, Christ's bride, Christ's flock, God's temple! Each word-picture displays a dynamic interdependence, borrowing its character from that of Christ her decisive Head, precious Cornerstone, self-giving Husband and trustworthy Shepherd. The church that remembers its origin and ongoing derivation in Christ will find resources for its high calling to reflect his character in the world. It must change.

Peter and Cornelius: Change Agent in a Culture-locked World

Revisiting Jesus' last days on earth when he had reached the time to depart back to Father, he looked at his band of provincially-minded Jewish disciples to whom he had issued a staggering command to spread his glad tidings to "all nations" (Luke 24:47) – empires of Caesars, philosophical halls, ashrams of swamis and monasteries of enlightened ones – he commanded them to "stay here in the city [Jerusalem] until you have been clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49 NRSV). In addition to bringing life-giving dunamis to the church, the Holy Spirit would continue to engineer its global mission by shaping its mind to that of Christ (John 15:26-7; 16:13-4).

The Holy Spirit filled the church and the job of the church was to receive those God had added. The Lord who had added to the church in Jerusalem individuals sharing the same heritage (Acts 2:47), next desired to reach different nations and peoples. These additions did not alter definitions of the church nor push ecclesiological boundaries beyond those already established by Jesus in his discipling mandates. Sociology does not change ecclesiological definitions but illustrates its composition.

Such was the Spirit's work. Despite the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Jewish believers at Pentecost, however, they remained locked into their own cultural thinking patterns. By what means did the Spirit enable the Jewish church to overcome its resistance to Gentile inclusion? In today's world, the fact that oil and water do not mix is common knowledge. In the world of the first century, that Jews and Gentiles did not sit together at the table meal was axiomatic. Historic animosities, dietary laws, post-exilic ethnic insulation and ethnocentric pride all presented formidable barriers to interaction.¹³⁵ Even after the momentous change experienced personally and collectively with the infusion of the Spirit received at Pentecost, Peter had to learn that in practice racial reconciliation has no shortcuts. While in Acts 2 he graciously received a new heart by faith as described later in Acts 15:8-9, it was events that were recorded in Acts 10 that reset the boundaries of this Jew, propelling him into what was for him a perilously forbidden red zone.¹³⁶ The change in Peter personally and the church corporately is nothing short of the pivotal event in the history of global missions. Luke narrates it with considerable detail and repetition, complementing the mystical union with Christ through the Spirit given at Pentecost now with the ongoing revelation of the Spirit advancing the *missio Dei*. One without the other, it may be inferred, is incomplete. It required what NT scholar Dean Flemming aptly describes as a "tale of two conversions," one of Cornelius, a "representative Gentile," and the other of Peter who was the "spokesman and representative of the Jerusalem apostles and the Jewish Christian church."¹³⁷ While

¹³⁵ Sentiments tended to be mutually divided. There was both "the failure of the Christian mission to Israel, and the intransigence of the Christians in his own church who were opposed to accepting Gentiles." Donald Senior, C.P. and Carroll Stuhlmueller, C.P., *The Biblical Foundations for Mission* (MaryKnoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983, 1991), 246.

¹³⁶ Even following that event, he still was capable of lapsing into his former thinking on the matter of table fellowship in Galatians. Old traditions run deep.

¹³⁷ In a superb treatment of the subject of contextualizing the gospel as it passes into new cultural arenas, Dean Flemming distinguishes "representative" over against "typical" to describe the Gentile status of Cornelius in that he was no "pagan, but neither is he a proselyte, since he is not circumcised and does not

Cornelius' conversion is to Christ, Peter's is "a theological and cultural transformation."¹³⁸

The first "tale" begins with a dramatic vision given to provincially minded Peter and supports the hypothesis that the most formidable barriers to mission are not geographical but mental. Removing the obstacle to Jesus' mission to the Gentiles called for a reversal in the entrenched prejudices against them that were lodged in the minds of the church. This God did by confronting Peter in the starkest measure with the repugnance of his own attitude. Such was achieved by the sudden descent of a sheet on which were live creatures of revulsion, despicable critters and non-kosher fare. Accompanying this heavenly vision came a direct order to "kill and eat!" (Acts 10:13). Even while acknowledging the source of this command, Peter unfalteringly protests, "By no means, Lord" (Acts 10:14 NASB). His impulsive resistance, resting upon a long tradition of strict kosher practice, became perplexity, searching for a reason the Lord would order such a thing that contradicted a distinguishing practice of Jewish identity. The voice answered with a three-fold repetition of, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy" (Acts 10:15). On the heels of this episode on the roof came a personal visit that was just as remarkable when two non-Jewish men arrived at his door. That encounter with them brought the prior event into clear focus. Now Peter understood that the object lesson being taught through divine revelation was not about food. Instead, it simultaneously exposed a stark contrast and expanded a new frontier. The magnitude of God's impartial love stood polar opposite to his restrictive ethnocentricity. Truly unsavory was not the peoples he been brought up to regard as unclean, but the distasteful bigotry

keep Jewish food laws." He represents a "'bridge group' for the progress of the gospel into the Gentile arena." Flemming, *Contextualization*, 35-6.

¹³⁸ "Peter must be converted to a new vision of what constitutes the people of God, one that includes uncircumcised and 'unclean' Gentiles as well as Jews. This is perhaps the more difficult and dramatic change of the two, because it challenges deep-seated cultural values and Jewish ethnocentrism." Flemming, *Contextualization*, 36.

he had towards them. That must find correction for the sake of Christ's mission. The change in Peter began.

The second conversion "tale" involved Cornelius and his comrades, Roman citizens (Acts 10:34-35). Willingly, Peter accompanied his visitors into the home of Cornelius. The private epiphany on his roof gave shape to his introductory statements: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him." As a result, Peter in Acts 10:28 informs them that "...it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean." This new revelation meant that nothing could stay as it was. The borderlands, once seen as hazardous boundaries, would become frontiers of opportunity. Following in the footsteps of his Master before him, Peter took the salvation message beyond previous borders.

Third, Acts 10 narrates the heart of Peter's message, the Jesus story in detail beginning with his baptism and ending with his ascension. Proclaiming Jesus risen from the dead as the "Lord of all" (v 36) and "as Judge of the living and the dead" (v 42 NASB), Peter, on authority of prophetic witness, announces to those he had previously considered "unclean" that "through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins" (v 43). That very moment the Spirit descended upon everyone in the house, bringing a human act of preaching into a divine event of salvation. All who were present were brought into the saving knowledge of God. But more, it became a people-blending event. Against all odds, an ethnic barrier collapsed as the Spirit melded two previously incompatible groups into a single community of grace. This "Gentile Pentecost" convinced the Jewish believers that the church had not only grown in size but in kind, from a monocultural to a multiethnic fellowship. A new ecclesial norm is established. Gospel truth and Spirit power created an impossible fusion: Jews and Gentiles blended into one. "Oil" and "water," can indeed mix when bonded by a third

agent, the Spirit, converting existing elements into a new ontological creation. For “the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word” (Acts 10:44). The amazement that had accompanied the works of Jesus now will follow the visitation of the Spirit! “The Jewish Christians were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on Gentiles” (Acts 10:45). As predicted by the prophets, the nations would speak the language of Canaan with the Jew in praise to one Lord. Finally, God lifts the ancient curse of Babel through this new inclusion and began to banish the mental barriers to mission of ethnocentricity, bigotry and racism.

What will come of these fresh insights precipitated by Peter’s extraordinary experiences? Will they remain his private domain or somehow become a new paradigm for the whole church? The answer will largely be determined by the receptivity or resistance among Peter’s Jewish colleagues who had been absent. Would they not be elated that Peter had done the very thing that Jesus, in the presence of them all, had commanded them?¹³⁹ The answer is no. Luke reports that when news of Peter’s encounter reached them, it received a cold reception: “those who were circumcised took issue with him” (Acts 11:2b). How can we explain their protest? Had they abandoned those direct orders or been absent from the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost? The problem involved table fellowship: “You went to uncircumcised men and ate with them” (Acts 11:3c NASB). Had it been Cornelius and his Roman companions who had visited Peter’s table with kosher-compliance, perhaps the matter would have been dropped. But Peter had gone to the table of a Gentile and such was intolerable. Their objection was explicitly cultural, elevating the particular restrictions required from their unique Jewish heritage to the level of universal applicability. For “as long as Jewish dietary rules that

¹³⁹ This commission was given on multiple occasions with different emphases: “make disciples or all nations” (Matt 28:19); “preach the gospel to all creation” (Mark 16:15); and “proclaimed in His name to all the nations” (Luke 24:47, NASB).

blocked social interaction between Jews and Gentiles (cf. Acts 10:28) were in effect, the church could never become a multicultural community.”¹⁴⁰

Peter presented three evidences to defend his actions. First, he explained that his border-crossing journey bears witness to the *missio Dei*, informing them that it was “the Spirit [who] told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and me” (Acts 11:12). Despite the segregating divide over his Jewish and their foreign roots, he did so without drawing attention to that social practice. A critical distinction is implied here. Luke records how Peter demonstrates amenability to new revelation of truth as well as considerable cross-cultural sensitivity to those he had earlier regarded as loathsome. Such reveals the nature of Peter’s prior condition calling for correction. His earlier provincialism cannot simply be vilified as racist incorrigibility requiring a scolding, but should be seen as a culture-locked mind demanding a special key in the form of a transcendentally validated alternative. Second, Peter defended his actions by recalling prior revelation, remembering “the word of the Lord” through John the Baptist who had “baptized with water” but had instructed that “you will be baptized by the Holy Spirit.” This instruction that he attributes not to John but to “the Lord,” caused Peter to apply it beyond the first Jewish audience on the banks of the Jordan River to those reclining attentively in the home of a Gentile in Caesarea. To these validating confirmations, Peter adds a third: authenticating signs, matching phenomena to that which he and his Jewish colleagues had earlier experienced themselves in the Upper Room. Combined, these led him to conclude: “If then the Lord gave them this same gift that he gave us when we first believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?” (Acts 11:16).¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰ Flemming, *Contextualization*, 38.

¹⁴¹ F. F. Bruce writes, “God had made no difference between believing Gentiles and believing Jews; how could Peter maintain a barrier which God plainly did not recognize? To do so would be to oppose God.” F. F.

Having been exposed to this new information, how will the Jewish apostles respond?" Will it fall on deaf ears or will they bring counter-evidence to support their prejudices? Luke records that "When they heard this, they were silenced." Revelation so abrupt caused an immediate hush. The post-Pentecost apostolic band that no longer shied away from speaking out when truth is on the line (Acts 4, esp. 18-20) became remarkably quiet. The interval allowed sufficient time for Peter's words to penetrate like a solvent to dissolve deeply ingrained mental constructs of racial prejudice. Once processed, they burst into spontaneous doxology for the fact that "God has given even the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life!" (See Acts 2, 10; 15:14, 19-20). This amazement, echoing Peter's earlier surprise, signaled the nature of their deficiency. They too had been bound by narrow regionalism which had caused them to absolutize local customs, taint personal opinions toward outsiders and section themselves off from the very ones that Christ had commanded them to reach. Having been filled with the Spirit at Pentecost, their religious worldview had remained unfazed, stuck in old thinking. Subsequent to the dramatic change wrought by the Spirit in that historic event, ongoing modification in mission-impinging practices required a transformative process among the same recipients that was guided by the same Spirit. Their reflective submission to these sequential promptings of the Spirit showed their true colors.

Next, Luke introduces Barnabas in such a way as to highlight a critical qualification for missional leadership: courageous openness to new missional directions of the Holy Spirit. His credentials were duly noted as "a good man, full of the Holy Spirit and full of faith" (Acts 11:24). Luke presents us with a model leader for the MEC, one who is "full," to be sure, but not of religion, of traditions, or of conventional thinking, but of

Bruce, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: Commentary on the Book of Acts* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub, 1954), 236.

the “Holy Spirit and faith.” Described here is a spiritually-formed individual who keeps learning and developing the mind of Christ. Last, when new revelation is received by such men and women who are “full of the Holy Spirit,” it advances the cause of the *missio Dei*: “a great many people were brought to the Lord” (Acts 11:24).

Antioch: A Multiethnic Church in a City Divided

How does the historic breakthrough of inclusive salvation of Gentiles at the home of Cornelius bring shape to the congregation? The answer to that question finds concrete expression in the city of Antioch, home of the first ethnically inclusive church. Antioch, Syria in the first century A.D. was perhaps the third largest city in the Empire after Rome and Alexandria.¹⁴² Culturally heterogeneous and religiously pluralistic, Antioch housed the worship of Apollo and Artemis as well having a considerable population of Jews who ranked the city “in importance with Alexandria in Egypt and Seleucia on the Tigris.”¹⁴³ It was no stranger to historic interethnic conflicts. “There were many clashes between the Jews and other citizens of Antioch, and at one point the Jews were in danger of annihilation.”¹⁴⁴ The Book of Acts describes its emergence, composition and pivotal role in the *missio Dei* (Acts 11:19-30; 13:1-3).

Grace Abounding. One might presume that the formation of the first Jew and Gentile church in primitive Christianity at Antioch emerged simply through human contingencies. Acts 11:19 recounts how persecution in Jerusalem precipitated a diaspora movement of the church whose members fled the city preaching the gospel as they went: “...men of Cyprus and Cyrene, who came to Antioch and began speaking to the Greeks also, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them, and

¹⁴² *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, s. v. “Antioch,” by L. M. McDonald, eds. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, electronic ed., 2000).

¹⁴³ McDonald, “Antioch,” *Dictionary*.

¹⁴⁴ McDonald, “Antioch,” *Dictionary*.

a large number who believed turned to the Lord" (11:20-21 NASB). The narrative, however, places that spreading message in the larger history of the advancing grace of God.¹⁴⁵ Opposition in Jerusalem is presented as the immediate catalyst in the epochal supernatural event that began in the home of Cornelius in which "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18 NASB). When news reached the apostles in Jerusalem and they sent Barnabas for an investigative visit in which he "witnessed the grace of God" (Acts 11:28 NASB). This grace "was described as not remaining statically within its divine source, but it could be said to be or come or to rest dynamically 'upon' ... a body of believers as they 'gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus' (4:33). Grace was, therefore, an active force in human history."¹⁴⁶ For the purposes of the present work, in addition to its motions as an animating force, the grace of God becomes a visible phenomenon,¹⁴⁷ a manifestation bringing momentous ecclesiological ramifications: the existence of one church. Pelikan continues, "Earlier in the present chapter (11:17), the evidence that the grace of God had come to Gentile Christians no less than it had to Jewish Christians was seen as a powerful argument, indeed a clinching one, for the equality of all in the church."¹⁴⁸ The roster of "prophets¹⁴⁹ and teachers" makes that visible equality even more dramatic: "Barnabas,, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul" (Acts 13:1 NASB).

¹⁴⁵ For a summary of the doctrine of grace in the book of Acts see R. R. Reno, ed., *Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible: Acts* by Jaroslav Pelikan (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2005), 138-39.

¹⁴⁶ Pelikan, *Acts*, 139.

¹⁴⁷ Christians live between two appearances of God's grace in the incarnation and Second Coming: "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men...looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus..." (Titus 2:11, 13 NASB).

¹⁴⁸ Pelikan, *Acts*, 164.

¹⁴⁹ For the gift of prophecy, see Acts 21:8-10; 3:1; 15:32; Rom 12:6; 1 Cor 12:10.

From Soteriology to Ecclesiology. As that church continues to experience rapid growth (Acts 11:24), Barnabas leaves to retrieve Saul, the young Jewish convert of Tarsus who had been commissioned for a Gentile ministry, to assist in teaching this diverse Antiochene congregation. He remained there for an “entire year” (Acts 11:26). During this time followers of Christ were given the name “Christians” (Acts 11:26). The organic unity of this church with that in Jerusalem is seen in its generous relief efforts made to the believers in Judea who were faced with famine (Acts 11:29). This display of reciprocity and mutual contributions – Judea believers had given the gospel to the citizens of Antioch and now those recipients lavished benevolent support back to the Judeans in their deprivation – undoubtedly forms the backdrop of Paul’s later teaching in 2 Corinthians 8-9.

Later a development in Antioch threatened to destroy its tranquility and silence its initial joy. This was occasioned by a challenge to the doctrine of salvation by grace alone and produced what could be argued to be the most significant theological council in Christian mission.

Council of Jerusalem: Defining Moment for a Global Church

Ernest Haenchen ranked the formation and decision of the first ecumenical Council reported in Acts 15 to a place of chief importance in the book of Acts. He notes, “Chapter 15 is the turning point, ‘centerpiece’ and ‘watershed’ of the book, the episode which rounds off and justifies the past developments, and makes those to come intrinsically possible.”¹⁵⁰ The book of Acts attributes the ongoing growth and sustained health of the church to supernatural intervention through the Spirit. God opened doors of faith to Gentile peoples (Acts 14:27; 13:4, 6, 14; 14:1; 16:9; cf. 1 Cor 16:9; 2 Cor 2:12;

¹⁵⁰ Ernest Haenchen, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Commentary* (Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell, 1956; 14th German edition, 1965; transl. into English, 1971), 241; quoted in John R. W. Stott, ed., *The Bible Speaks Today: The Message of Acts* by John R. W. Stott (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 241.

Col 4:3 and Rev 3:8)¹⁵¹ so that “the trickle of Gentile conversions was fast becoming a torrent.¹⁵² by stimulating a ripeness for spiritual receptivity (Acts 13:42, 48). In contrast to their rapid growth was the resistance from many Jewish leaders (Acts 13:45-47) to whom Paul first offered the gospel. We also see divine intervention in truth encounters. Theological clarification became necessary to advance the gospel from one culture to another, retaining the kerygmatic core and removing unnecessary barriers to salvation. To do otherwise is to “test God” (Acts 15:10, 19). The urgent issue making such a Council necessary was likely the same as that described by Paul in Galatians 2:11-16¹⁵³ when he openly rebuked Peter (and other Jewish Christians) for their hypocritical behavior at mealtime. When alone with the Gentile believers they ate together in celebration of the gospel’s freedom but upon the arrival of visiting Jewish leaders from Jerusalem they instantly reverted back into old patterns of segregation. This, for Paul, was nothing short of denying the truth of the gospel (Gal 2:14). It is clear that the Council of Jerusalem has not yet convened,¹⁵⁴ for “Its unanimous decision liberated the gospel from its Jewish swaddling clothes into being God’s message for all humankind, and gave the Jewish-Gentile church a self-conscious identity as the reconciled people of God, the one body of Christ.”¹⁵⁵

The contenders in this “sharp dispute” (Acts 15:2) were these. The first group consisted of Jewish Pharisee converts (Acts 15:5) suggesting they were men of erudition who formerly taught the Law who, now as believers, had begun a teaching ministry in the church (Acts 15:1). Lacking understanding of the full meaning of the Cross, they took

¹⁵¹ NT precedent for divine intervention in the opening and shutting doors for mission , see Acts 16:6-9.

¹⁵² Stott, *Acts*, 240.

¹⁵³ Stott, *Acts*, 242.

¹⁵⁴ Stott, *Acts*, 241.

¹⁵⁵ Stott, *Acts*, 241.

the position that salvation for Gentiles comes by God's grace through faith plus adherence to the Jewish law, especially the rite of circumcision (Acts 15:1, 6). In sharp disagreement were those in the second group consisting of world missionaries whose key proponents were named: Paul and Barnabas present by appointment (Acts 15:2b) and Peter who came with a fresh testimony of Gentiles converting to Christ (Acts 15:7-11). Presiding over the Council was James¹⁵⁶ whose personal practices of piety and scrupulous law-keeping made him a sympathizer with the first group but whose theology clearly identified him with the second.

This Council was called by the apostles and church elders so that both sides could be considered (Acts 15:2, 6), the truth of the gospel protected, unity of the fellowship preserved and Christ's advancing mission unhindered (Acts 15:1-2, 7a). The Spirit-guided process involved four necessary steps: (1) listening to the issue from both sides, (2) exploration for biblical insight, (3) arrival at consensus within Scriptural alignment with a judicious application for the sake of unity and (4) effectively publishing their decision to the churches at large.

James makes a recommendation on the basis of missionary reports, scriptural agreement followed by an argument of his own (Acts 15:19-21). They reached agreement and that all could live with and abide by (Acts 15:22-23) and then put it in writing. Finally, they carefully chose trusted leaders, those with a proven record of devotion to the gospel, to deliver this decision to the churches.

The value of the Jerusalem Council was extraordinary. Theologically at stake was its clear distinction between gospel and culture so that both the gospel's universality and particularity would be protected. Peter argued vehemently from the incident with

¹⁵⁶ Later called "James the Just" because of "his reputation for godly righteousness, one of the brothers of Jesus, who had probably come to believe in him through being granted a resurrection appearance (Mark 6:3; Acts 1:14; 1 Cor 15:7)." Stott, *Acts*, 246.

Cornelius that had occurred about ten years earlier¹⁵⁷ that salvation by mere grace was unmistakably divine in origin and evenly applicable to Jew and Gentile. Clearly it was God's "choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe" (Acts 15:7 NASB). Further, "God who knows the heart, testified to them¹⁵⁸ giving them the Holy Spirit just as He did to us" (Acts 15:8 NASB). In that bestowal of the Spirit "He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith" (Acts 15:9 NASB).¹⁵⁹ Peter then confronts them directly that they are "putting God to the test" (15:10), "that is, why do you provoke him by resisting what he has clearly revealed?"¹⁶⁰ Their provocation came in the form of weighing others down with requirements that they themselves had failed to carry (Acts 15:10). Peter then brought ringing precision to his soteriological conclusion: "On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." There was no rebuttal (Acts 15:12)! Paul and Barnabas then reported all that "God had done through them among the Gentiles" (Acts 15:12). James then made a direct link between the apostolic testimony of Peter with the prophetic word. He drew from Amos 9:11-12 that predicts a time when God will "rebuild David's fallen tent" so "that the remnant of men may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who bear my name..."¹⁶¹

At stake ecclesiologically for the MEC is the equalizing effect of redemptive grace upon believers. The way in which Peter completely erased differences between the

¹⁵⁷ Stott, *Acts*, 245.

¹⁵⁸ "...meaning, 'showed his approval of them.' Stott, *Acts*, 245.

¹⁵⁹ "This proves that Peter's earlier statement that 'God...accepts men from every nation who fear him...' (10:35) meant that there is no racial barrier to conversion; but God 'accepted them' in the sense of welcoming them into his family only when he gave them his Spirit." Stott, *Acts*, 245.

¹⁶⁰ Stott, *Acts*, 245.

¹⁶¹ "This quotation from Amos is a powerful statement of two related truths. God promises first to restore David's fallen tent and rebuild its ruins (which Christian eyes see as a prophecy of the resurrection and exaltation of Christ, the seed of David, and the establishment of his people) so that, secondly, a Gentile remnant will seek the Lord. In other words, through the Davidic Christ Gentiles will be included in his new community." Stott, *Acts*, 247.

saving experiences of Jews and Gentiles by repeating “us-them” and “we-they” (Acts 15:9, cf. 10:15, 20, 29; 11:9, 12, 17) is expressed to show that “God makes no distinction.” That theological truth is not relegated to realms of either private piety nor to subsets of homogeneous camaraderie but lifts each of these beyond themselves. The base enables the breadth of community. According to Stott, “Grace and faith level us; they make fraternal fellowship possible.”¹⁶²

The Jerusalem Council is also valuable procedurally when the church is faced with controversy.¹⁶³ What effect did this conciliar process,¹⁶⁴ as well as the decision it produced, have upon the churches? In one after another, Luke carefully reports two immediate impactful results. They were gladdened and strengthened (Acts 15:31-5; 16:5) and for good reason. Clearing up the confusion, it bolstered morale (Acts 15:31), preserved their unity, revitalized their energy for the work of the gospel (Acts 15:35; 16:5). The Council of Jerusalem could not prevent the issue of circumcision from recurring, for Paul continued combatting it. It did, however, provide a clear, corporate and biblical policy that became an authoritative tool whenever the issue arose.

So far, we have noted two ways in which the narrative has recounted how the Spirit advances the *missio Dei*. First, as the Spirit of life he forms Jew and Gentile, all peoples, into a new ontological creation as the very temple of God on earth. Second, as the Agent of change he renewed its mindset, replacing its deeply ingrained ethnocentric leanings with the mind of Christ.

¹⁶² Stott, *Acts*, 246.

¹⁶³ Jaroslav Pelikan writes, “This entire chapter has served throughout Christian history as a model for decision-making in the church and as a charter both for authority at church councils and for the authority of church councils.” Pelikan, *Acts*, 175.

¹⁶⁴ “The calling of a Council can be extremely valuable, if its purpose is to clarify doctrine, end controversy and promote peace.” Stott, *Acts*, 244.

Landmark 8: Conversion of Saul from Tarsus-- Apostle to the Nations and Planter of Communities of Reconciliation

The conversion and commission of Saul of Tarsus narrated in Acts 9 is undoubtedly the landmark event in the proclamation of the gospel to the nations that would, in turn, lead to the formation of inclusive churches and their ecclesiological articulation. His unexpected encounter with the living Christ on the Damascus Road dramatically reinforces the supernatural means by which the church advanced, “for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear my name before the Gentiles...” (Acts 9:15 NASB).¹⁶⁵

Paul and the MEC: Theological Praxis for the Inclusive Church

Two NT Epistles bearing Paul's name have played a key role in renewing the mindset and practice of this pastor in leading GRIF in its transition from a monocultural to a diverse congregation: the books of Romans and Ephesians. Specific lessons that we have gleaned from these as well as theological motifs that have inspired, shaped and guided us will be noted below.

Romans: Robust Soteriology Calls for Embrace of the Excluded “Other”

The book of Romans provided us with an audacious faith that has taken our journey in areas we would not otherwise have gone. Belief and not momentum, this pastor continues to learn, is the backbone of the multiethnic congregation. When momentum wanes, belief sustains. Biblically speaking, true faith rests in God's Word that, in turn, produces action, for “faith without works is dead” (Jas 2:26). This law of cause and effect was at work in Abraham's willingness to take the audacious act of offering his son Isaac on the altar was contingent upon his bedrock belief in the

¹⁶⁵Paul's theological engagement with the nations, religion and idolatry will be discussed in Chapter 3.

character and power of God (Jas 2:21-23; Heb 11:17-19). Likewise, when a monocultural church located in a culture besieged by racial conflict believes God is calling it to take the risky path to cross borders into unknown territory for the purpose of reaching and including the neighbor, it must be driven by deep convictions.

Romans shed enormous light on issues facing the MEC, matters that are neither academic nor restricted to the ancient world. While the book of Acts dramatically narrates the work of the Spirit in forming the church through people-fusing events, the book of Romans systematically elucidates a people-fusing theology. Doctrine, it is assumed, is not for doctrine's sake, but exists for the upbuilding of the church and its mission by informing obedience. In this present case, it applies gospel truths to removing barriers and building bridges within a local congregation to form an inclusive congregation. It was crucial in providing a theological rationale for making this transition to diversity. Three specific aspects in this Epistle captured this pastor's attention early on and shaped the thematic selections of the pulpit: the challenging demographic composition of the Roman church, the high ecclesiological expectations demanded from its robust soteriology, and its inescapable implications for congregations located in similarly populated settings.

The social context of the Roman churches. Of special significance to us was not merely what Romans says, but to whom it was first addressed. This network of congregations was composed of Jewish and Greek believers who harbored mutual attitudes that were hardly neutral. Roman society in general did not look favorably to the Jews nor Jews to Roman society.¹⁶⁶ If that mutual antipathy was not enough, the church

¹⁶⁶ "... the Jewish community was both influential in Rome and deeply despised, not to say hated, by the most influential voices of the Roman intelligentsia. This was partly because of its sheer size, partly because of the preferential treatment they had received from Julius Caesar and Augustus, and, probably more important, because of the numbers of Gentiles who were attracted to Judaism. These will also no doubt have been factors in the tensions between Jew and Gentile evident in the letter..." Gerald F. Hawthorne,

faced a sudden crisis precipitated by the Roman emperor Claudius. It had been founded most likely by those who were present at Pentecost and had believed in Jesus as Messiah, including both Jews and Greek proselytes to Judaism (Acts 2:10). Its leadership, no doubt, expressed worship and served God in Jewish ways. That would suddenly and dramatically change.

Sometime in the 40s A.D., the emperor Claudius, like the earlier emperor Tiberius, expelled the Jewish community from Rome (see Acts 18:2 and the Roman historians Suetonius and Dio Cassius). The Roman church was thus composed entirely of Gentiles until Claudius's death, when his edict was automatically repealed, and Jewish Christians returned to Rome (Rom 16:3).¹⁶⁷

By a conservative estimate, Gentile Christians would have led the church at Rome a minimum of a decade (given the death of Claudius in A.D. 54), giving them sufficient time to become well-established as leaders. They would have reached out to other Gentiles from Roman society, worshiped God in ways that were meaningful to them; that is, Roman ways. In light of long-standing hostilities that had flared up between these groups as well as the immediate influx of returning Jewish leaders, the potential for schism into separate congregations becomes obvious. Out of this collision of cultures comes the book of Romans. "Jewish and Gentile Christians had different cultural ways of expressing their faith in Jesus; Paul thus must address a church experiencing tension between two valid cultural expressions of the Christian faith."¹⁶⁸ Theologically, Paul could not imagine two Christian communities, even though members in Christ then and now have strong affinity with our cultural identities. As Christopher Wright notes,

The Gentile Christian...is a person of two histories: on the one hand, his own national and cultural background, ancestry and heritage, which...is by no means

Ralph P. Martin, Daniel G. Reid, *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, Logos Library Systems, 1997), 838.

¹⁶⁷ Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997), s. v. Rom 1:1, electronic ed.

¹⁶⁸ Keener, *IVP Bible Background*, electronic ed.

to be despised, and on the other hand, his new spiritual, 'ingrafted' history – that of God's people descended from Abraham which he inherits through inclusion in Christ.¹⁶⁹

Significantly, "for Paul, there was only one people of God – then, now or ever. No, the Gentiles were being grafted into the original stock."¹⁷⁰ The way to go about resolving two polarized cultures in the church is not to advocate two separate congregations. But given the religious and social challenges, how could it possibly play out?

Ecclesiological Expectations Demanded from Robust Soteriology. High ecclesiological standards were set in place (Rom 14-15:13) on the basis of its robust soteriological realities discussed in its earlier chapters (Rom 1-11). Three specific applications were particularly useful to this pastor in guiding GRIF during the period of its early launch into diversity.

First, an inclusive fellowship is unified around a common submission to Jesus Christ as Lord rather than a common commitment to cultural expressions. Each member is allowed freedom to express his or her devotion in ways that are God-directed and personally meaningful.

Evidence that Christ is Lord over an MEC is seen in the shared affection of its members rather than conformity to cultural norms. Inclusion of others has a higher value than managing them: "Paul has in view mutual acceptance among those continuing to maintain different praxis (Rom 14:3-6, 23)..."¹⁷¹ Romans 14:2-3 spells out matters of conscience that vary among Jewish and Gentile Christians, followed by a question, "Who are you to judge the servant of another? To his own master he stands or falls; and he will stand, for the Lord is able to make him stand" (Rom 14:2-4 NASB). Paul

¹⁶⁹ Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 53.

¹⁷⁰ Wright, *Knowing Jesus*, 53.

¹⁷¹ Ralph P. Martin, ed., *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 38, *Romans 9-16* by James D. G. Dunn (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 846.

sanctions this latitude because “he who observes the [Sabbath] day, observes it for the Lord, and he who eats, does so for the Lord...” (Rom 14:6 NASB). Of greater value than conformity to dietary rules is a kingdom-community of mutual caring and edification (Rom 14:17, 19, etc.). Paul warns against two dangers, either “tearing down” (Rom 14:20 NASB) God’s work over matters of personal conscience or indulging in excessive personal liberties to the detriment of others (Rom 14:22). “The fundamental principle of a truly Christian ethic – it is other-regarding.”¹⁷²

A dynamic multiracial community is possible only if latitude under the Lordship of Christ is allowed. Joseph Stowell, President of Cornerstone University, addressing a recent city-wide rally in Grand Rapids, “Race to Unity,” said it succinctly, “The only race to unity is the race to Christ.”¹⁷³ I resonated with his central focus that was not culture but Christ. As members are given tolerance under the submission to our Lord, any number of coexisting groups regardless of age, gender, ethnicity, education, economic level can gather without threatening division in the body of Christ.

Second, inclusive fellowship happens when church members welcome others of a different culture according to the pattern that Jesus accepted them. The central imperative in Romans 15 is found in verse 7: “Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God” (Rom 15:7 TNIV). The strength of this verb, to accept¹⁷⁴ or welcome, could be easily regarded in Western culture as nothing more than a conventional greeting such as a handshake and smile. To the Roman

¹⁷² Ben Witherington III, *Paul’s Letter to the Romans: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004), 345.

¹⁷³ Convened at Kentwood Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 5, 2009.

¹⁷⁴ From *proslambano*, “to accept the presence of a person with friendliness—‘to welcome, to receive, to accept, to have as a guest.’” J. P. Louw & E. A. Nida. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains* (1996, c1989) electronic ed. of the 2nd edition.) To “welcome” suggests bold effort that in modern parlance might be “Go out of your way. Step out of your comfort zone on behalf of another person.”

church, it went deeper. The term “hospitality” is not used here, yet *proslambano* calls us to similar action, denoting to “receive into one’s home or group”¹⁷⁵ or to “receive or accept into one’s society, home, circle of acquaintances.”¹⁷⁶ The context is clear. He exhorts them to “broaden out”¹⁷⁷ beyond their respective groups to bring the other into their circles from the “other side.” It calls them to embrace that brother or sister with whom cultural distance exists and, possibly, includes a painful past.

In its social context in the ancient world, welcoming involves hospitality (lit., love of the stranger) and table fellowship. For the Jew and Gentile to do so with each other would have been strange and, probably, construed as a betrayal by one’s own group. Such action was anything but conventional and raises the question of who in that culture would follow such a command. Why expose oneself to ridicule by others of one’s “own kind?” What incentive would compensate for the risk of betraying a member from one’s own group by embracing those from an oppositional group or simply an outsider, especially when there is no guarantee of a friendly reception? Only one motive for welcoming them is provided and only one is necessary: “just as Christ has welcomed you” (verse 7b). That is, each one is to recall the door through which he or she had entered the family of God and that door was Christ crucified. The immediate context points to the “insults” that had our names on them but were intercepted by Christ who took them as his own so that he might bring us into his loving fold (15:3).

One of the central aims of Romans now becomes clear. It is to include the excluded. Both the Jewish and Gentile Christians present knew what it was like to be outsiders. Theologically, the Jews were first to receive salvation (Rom 1:16) and formed the dominant group that included Gentile believers. By virtue of Caesar’s edict of eviction of

¹⁷⁵ Witherington, *Romans*, 330.

¹⁷⁶ Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 797.

¹⁷⁷ Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, 845.

all Jews from Rome, however, the Gentiles of necessity assumed leadership for about a decade. A second government edict now permits Jews to return to the city. Their reentry into the church now places them in the position as newcomers in the church fellowship dominated by Gentiles.

The Gentiles had been excluded but seemed to have cared little. Romans 1:18-3:20 reminds them that the welcome mat was not always out to them, a fatal condition that did not seem to bother them, for they had deliberately avoided God anyway (Rom 1:18). Then in Romans 3:21 through chapter 5, it shows how Christ's welcoming them in involved far more than a handshake. It turned on the axis of *paradidimi*,¹⁷⁸ which pointed to a series of "handing over" or "delivering up" to powers greater than themselves. When they gave God up, exchanging him for created things, God gave them what they desired, "handing them over" to their desires.¹⁷⁹ They could hardly plead innocence. P. T. Forsyth stated it bluntly: "We are not simply wandering children or straying sheep; we are rebels, taken with weapons in our hands."¹⁸⁰ Gentile rejection of the moral law written on their hearts resulted in futility. Opting out of the constraints of divine interference failed to live up to its imagined freedom, instead it locked them in the prison cell of their basest selves. The Jews who possessed the Law fared no better. They too were indicted and "given over." Receiving the noble law in dramatic revelation at Sinai was not the same as

¹⁷⁸The meaning in this context is "to hand over, give (over), deliver,...turn over, give up a person, hand over into custody, ...deliver over into someone's hands..." For a detailed definition of *paradidimi*, see William Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker and Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996, c1979), electronic ed.

¹⁷⁹ The single violation is repeated four times (Rom 1:20, 23, 25, 28), incurring divine wrath in the Gentile world (Rom 1:18). It consisted of the inexcusable act of *handing over* the true God in exchange for trivializing substitutes. That action brought a similarly single response on the part of God, namely, his wrath, which consisted of granting their wish by letting them go their own way, *handing them over (paradidimi)* to their futile thoughts to do that which is disgraceful (Rom 1:24, 26, 28).

¹⁸⁰ Alex Deasley, "Justification and Beyond," *Preachers Magazine*, Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press (1979): 46.

obeying it in daily life. The noble Decalogue exposed an absent nobility of soul (Rom 2:1-11). Lawbreakers cannot rely on the law to save them (3:19-20). The Jew then, with the law can boast of no greater right of inclusion with God than the Gentile without it. Equally excluded (Rom 3:10), both groups within the church, Jews and Gentiles, looked back at a time when they stood equally desperate, in need for what the law could not deliver (11:32).

God answered the collective banishment of those he had “delivered over” with abundant mercy and grace through One he “delivered up”¹⁸¹ (Rom 4:25). At the cross God removed his wrath that had let them go and extended his welcome to let them in!¹⁸² Jesus himself was delivered up when handed over to executioners as an offering of atonement (Rom 3:21-25). The gift of divine forgiveness became the means to a greater end, peace with God and inclusion in the holy presence of the welcoming heavenly Father. Paul writes, “Since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Rom 5:1-2 TNIV). The point is that a robust soteriology that inspires hymns of grace and inexhaustible gratitude in personal devotion also serves another remarkable end. It becomes the reproducible template for mutual

¹⁸¹ *Paradothe*. “This word is common in the passion story for the handing over of Jesus, e.g., by Judas in Mark 14:10, by the Sanhedrin to Pilate in Mark 15:1, by Pilate to the people’s will in Luke 23:25 and to the soldiers for execution in Mark 15:15.” F. Buschel, “*didome*,” in Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985), 167. See also Matt 27:26; Luke 24:20; John 19:16. As a fulfillment of scripture, see Luke 24:7, etc. Cf. the use of the term in Rom 8:32, in an act of the unsparing God who “gave him up for us all,” Eph 5:25 in which Jesus was no victim, but a willful agent who in love “gave himself up for her [the church]” (cf. Gal 2:20). See Isa 53:12 LXX. The term can also describe Christian leaders who imitate Christ in placing the well-being of others ahead of their own (2 Cor 4:11).

¹⁸² Nazarene theologian William M. Greathouse writes, “... Paul has presented a truly *inclusive account of the gospel*. In negative terms, *all of humanity* – Jews and Gentiles alike – are considered under the power of sin and alienated from God; in this sense there is “*no distinction*” (3:22 NRSV; see 3:10) between them. In positive terms – through Israel’s Messiah, Jesus – that common bond under sin has been victoriously overcome by God, bringing about a “much more” powerful *solidarity of grace and righteousness*, leading to eternal life “through Jesus Christ our Lord” (5:21; see 5:12-21).” William M. Greathouse, *Romans 9-16: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2008), 42.

inclusion: “welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Rom 15:7 ESV). In a world of interethnic conflict, this is a potent weapon of reconciliation. Like innumerable sequels to the Passion Play, a reenactment of the gospel of eternal life amid a culture of death, as disciples of Jesus we are called to answer cycles of violence by setting in motion hatred-dissolving cycles of grace.¹⁸³

While in full agreement with Jesus’ way of inclusion, many of us ask ourselves who can possibly duplicate his pattern. Is it too much to expect? Can we as individuals or churches exempt ourselves from this duty on the basis that the demand exceeds our capacity? Here churches and individuals can find reason for encouragement. Christ’s provision of welcoming us into the fold is more than a pattern to be copied but a new resource to be tapped. No disciple who reaches out to persons who they formerly excluded or simply overlooked, does so empty handed. Grace begets grace. Drawing resources from the reservoir of mercy, the once-estranged traverses the same trail by going to his sister or brother, extending friendship on a radically new basis.¹⁸⁴

What does this say about ecclesiology? Can a case be made that a church is truest to itself when its actions reveal the soteriology that formed it? It passes or fails to the degree that it initiates and sustains cross-cultural relationships (as well as same-cultural relationships!) as an expression of God’s grace? And perhaps by doing so, as the sole custodians entrusted with the gospel message, we might better tap the flow of grace. By adding to its normal course reaching family and friends to cut entirely new channels where it might display the capacities of its provision to the glory to God (Rom

¹⁸³ Chrysostom’s exhortation from Rom 15:7 is realistic: “Let us obey this command and bind ourselves closely to one another...If someone wants to break relations with you, do not do the same with him...Rather, display even more love toward him, that you may draw him to you,” quoted in Gerald Bray and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary of Scripture*, vol. 6, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 343.

¹⁸⁴ Capacity brings moral obligation, taught Jesus, for grace must beget grace. Divine forgiveness in its sheer immensity obliges its recipients to follow suit in interpersonal particularity under the threat of personal forfeiture (Matt 18:21-35).

15:7)? Where believers take risks by going out of their way, crossing borders to bring others in, God's love sets in motion new conditions of reconciliation that, in turn, produces a wider inclusion in the church. These actions, of course, guarantee no such reciprocity but even if it fails to win over my brother or sister, yet one is privileged to share in the fellowship of Christ's sufferings (Phil 3:11). A church is defined by who it follows. The nature of the church cannot be severed either from its Pattern or from the soteriology that forms it without inflicting self-injury. In settings of ethnic factions, can a unicultural ecclesiology justify its composition in light of the indisputably open-door soteriology which formed it?

Third, corporate worship in a diverse setting is enabled through God oriented worship in recognition of his saving acts and issues in a common submission to Jesus as Lord. Equalizing soteriology brings both Jewish and Gentile believers to the foot of the cross and forms the basis of shared worship. The same principle that applies to welcoming actions between different groups plays equally into corporate worship. Their common salvation through Jesus Christ enables them to "together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 15:6).¹⁸⁵ Though expressed freely through one's familiar culture, worship remains oriented towards God so that "Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy"¹⁸⁶ (Rom 15:9) and Jews for his faithfulness: "Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth [faithfulness] of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs" (Rom 15:8). Public worship in a MEC has its unique challenges and will be taken up again in Chapter 6.

¹⁸⁵ This exhortation obviously does not forbid ethnic-specific groups to meet separately to praise God in their own tongue and cultural forms. However, we believe that it should not substitute integrated worship.

¹⁸⁶ No less for the Jew (Rom 3:9-10; 11:32, etc.)!

Inescapable Implications. Despite the challenges, the message of Romans carried inescapable implications for us. Social realities plaguing ancient Rome did not cause Paul to lower the demands of the gospel. Later, the relationship between the Gentile-dominant church with Jewish people disappoints.¹⁸⁷ As a church leader, this pastor could not exempt himself from these inclusive expectations by claiming that “Paul doesn’t know my city. He just can’t understand the depth of hatred there is between the people groups surrounding my church.” Or, “Paul has no grasp of the broad spectrum of cultural diversity found in my neighborhood.” The fact is that Paul knew those challenges all too well. The themes we find in Romans and Ephesians overlap, but Ephesians ecclesiology paints the church with broad universal strokes, a kind of “Everywhere Church.” Romans, on the other hand, narrows the field to one very real setting: Rome. That capital city, strikingly close in its demographic composition to many of our own in metropolitan areas, makes its teaching all the more remarkable. It exposes some of our modern protests that “it can’t happen here” to be lame excuses. At the same time where the cross demands, the Spirit enables. From this book this pastor drew encouragement and particularly its imperative in Romans 15:7. Put simply, if an MEC became a reality in first-century Rome, it can also happen in our city, Grand Rapids, Michigan, known for its provincialism.

Today anyone who visits a worship service at GRIF will quickly see an ethnically diverse congregation. When we began this journey, however, our congregation was composed of one ethnic group with only a handful of exceptions. At that time, preaching and teaching centered on the themes in Romans 15:1-13. Even though we could not

¹⁸⁷ David Bosch notes the church’s failure in this matter: “It [the church] proved unable, in the long run, to make Jews feel at home. Beginning as a religious movement that worked exclusively among Jews, it changed, in the forties of the first century, to a movement for Jews and Gentiles alike, but wound up proclaiming its message to Gentiles only.” He cites two “catalytic events” which led to the rupture with the Jews: circumcision of Gentile converts and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in A.D. 70. Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 51.

deny Scripture's clear demand for difficult inclusion nor the saving grace capable of producing a thriving diverse congregation, we still found ourselves feeling tentative and wondering if anyone from non-white cultures would want to worship with us. But when motivation wanes, faith sustains. Romans fueled our faith. We were nervous yet hopeful about the future that God had for our Anglo congregation. An early message to a mostly white audience concluded with the question, "what now?"

The Multiethnic Church is a God-sized vision that is going to require God-sized resources. By making this change, we will best serve his purposes because it casts a broad net of love to people from all backgrounds which will result in praise among the nations.

As we launch this endeavor we are uncertain how it is going to work. Nevertheless, we are doing this convinced that it is the will of God, biblically-formed and part of the long story of salvation. Let's draw on divine resources, praying much so that we may put our faith into practice. Let's say with Paul, "We were not disobedient to the vision the Lord has given us!"

Ephesians: Reconciliation and Ecclesiology

The book of Ephesians provides the MEC with two foundational realities: the reconciling work of Christ and the Triune Godhead.

Part 1: Dual Reconciliation Creates New Bonds of Inclusion

How is it possible to form a dynamic community out of groups that historically have little or nothing to do with each other? Legislative devices, political policies, or coercive measures have all proven frustratingly feeble means of integrating groups of people in places of racial conflict.¹⁸⁸ Can a person experience that salvation by joyfully accepting God's gracious removal of the vertical wall, while at the same time erecting

¹⁸⁸ Examples of MEC successes and failures in the USA are described by its proponents in Paul Curtiss DeYoung, et al, *United by Faith*, 41-74. For a sobering look at the struggles involved in integrating interracial churches, particularly congregations of Blacks and Whites, see Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a discussion on the tentative nature of congregational multicultural unity, see Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 146-47.

horizontal barriers that prevent enemies to come close or engage in peaceful relations? Forgiveness in the face of genocidal murder, utter insanity if not for the cross, becomes possible only through the cross.¹⁸⁹ This was a major concern facing the NT church.

Where the soteriological themes in Romans placed the link of inclusion with the doctrine of justification, Ephesians strikes the note of reconciliation in shaping an inclusive ecclesiology. Acknowledging that God's gift of reconciliation requires the same to be offered to my enemy, does it also mandate an MEC? What does the dual aspect of reconciliation have to do with ecclesiology? To frame the question differently, can the soteriology of the New Testament justifiably create an ecclesiology of the Old? To answer this, let us go to the book of Ephesians.

Ongoing Barriers of Ostracism Dividing Believers. Paul knew that becoming reconciled to God was one thing while being accepted as equals by his people is quite another. Precisely here is where Ephesians 2:11 – 18 breaks new ground. The paramount issue is no longer the righteousness-challenged individual who, to his/her relief, discovers God's favor in the gospel (Eph 2:1-10). Now the difficulty comes in the stigmatizing attitudes expressed by the people of God who confer on other people groups, even within the church, inferior status. In this case, it is the Jew and Gentile, but in today's world, it could be the Tutsi and the Hutu or the African American and the Anglo or any strained ethnic relationship. How does Paul address this?

Badge of Exclusion. Paul applies a correction of solidarity between the Jewish elect and the Gentile convert. First, he addresses Gentile believers in 2:11-18 by

¹⁸⁹ Two notable accounts of Christian forgiveness in the wake of genocidal occurrences in the 1990's are Immaculee Ilibagiza, *Left to Tell: Discovering God Amidst the Rwandan Holocaust* (Carlsbad, CA: Hay House, 2006) and Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996). The first offers a moving account of Ilibagiza's response to the Rwandan massacre; the latter provides a cogent "theological exploration" that integrates the meaning of the cross with ethnic and gender identities after the genocidal slaughter of many of his countrymen in the Balkans.

reminding them of the label of disgrace that had been pinned on them, “uncircumcised,” by the covenant people who wore their circumcision as a badge of honor. The absence of this mark denoted exclusion and represented to them “what their religious condition in pre-Christian days looked like from a Jewish viewpoint.”¹⁹⁰ Deprived of citizenship in Israel the elect nation and its promised Messiah, they suffered “the saddest of all misfortunes” by “having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12).¹⁹¹ These two parts are meant to be understood together.¹⁹² They knew firsthand the meaning of being ostracized.

Badge of Inclusion. Next, Paul discredits this mark of Jewish pride and Gentile disgrace as a badge of belonging. In its place he establishes a new basis for inclusion, one that will close the gap between the Jew and Gentile. Through the coming of the Messiah, the basis of acceptance comes not through faith in circumcision but in his blood. Chapter two, verse 13 introduces a major shift (“But now”) bursting with new prospects about their new status: “you who were once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” The night of estrangement is spent and gives way to a dawn of nearness: “For He Himself is our peace who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (Eph 2:14 NASB). This was the direct result of Christ “setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations” (Eph 2:15) and culminated in a celebrated historic unity.

¹⁹⁰ Martin, *Ephesians*, 32.

¹⁹¹ “Indeed, Messiah’s coming in the intertestamental Psalms of Solomon about 50 B.C.E. meant the destruction of the Gentiles,” Martin, *Ephesians*, 33.

¹⁹² “Without God” does not mean a denial of God’s existence. There were very few atheists (in the modern sense) in the ancient world. Rather, the thought is that men and women outside the Judeo-Christian revelation (or the church, our author would insist) lack a true knowledge of God. The uncertainty arising from a pantheon of many gods and goddesses coupled with a prevailing tendency to despair ...led to a sad state of hopelessness. The Christian answer to both problems is found in a knowledge of the true God whose Son has opened a new era for the Gentiles in every age.” Martin, *Ephesians*, 33.

Creation of a New Humanity. Third, what God's grace achieves in the new creation of the individual believer (Eph 2:8-10), it does in the new "man" of the church. One united church emerges out of a peacemaking event for two ostracized groups. A single act co-achieves belonging and inclusion: "he is our peace, who has made us both one" (Eph 2:14). Out of this death of one Man, astonishingly, came a genesis, a new humanity and a historic new "race!" "His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility." This "one humanity" has in mind something far more than a dreamy aspiration. It points to a bona fide community, corporeal actuality, and brotherly tranquility arising out of real blood from the sin-bearing body of the innocent Son of God that was given for this very purpose. That blood mitigates far more than trivial irritations but carries sufficient power to "put to death their hostility." In this community, gone are old stigmas of pride and shame, having been stripped of all their force. Profit and losses will be recalculated to optimize the new community. Martin writes, "Both Jews and Gentiles in losing their ethnic and racial claims gain something in return which is said to be far better, namely, a place in Christ's body, as Christ's body, thereby forming a new race of humanity. Later writers therefore call the church "the third race" – neither Jews nor Gentiles but Christians."¹⁹³

New Ecclesiology. Fourth, a new humanity demands a new ecclesiology. That is, the nature of the church must factor in the "body" used in its double sense: "reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross" (Eph 2:16 ESV). This "one body" refers in its first instance not to the corporate church with separate parts but to the embodied Messiah with broken flesh by whom the church is made one. Gentiles who had up until

¹⁹³ Martin, *Ephesians*, 33.

that time been “far away” from God have been “brought near” by the “blood of Christ” issuing from his physical body (2:13). Christ “himself is our peace,” who made the two (Jews and Gentiles) one” by “abolishing in his flesh” that which stood between the Jew and Gentile world. By “destroying the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility” (2:14), he weaves together both aspects of reconciliation – to God and to one another, joining them into an indivisible new Man! The dual meaning of body corresponds with its effect of double reconciliation and may be succinctly conceived: “One body of Christ broken reconciles the believer to God – (v 16); One body of Christ united by the reconciling of believers to one another – (vv 13-16)”. Reconciliation so oriented merges Father and family. Peace with God through his adoptive grace attracts distant prodigals to the Father and simultaneously establishes a basis for parallel societies to converge into a single community. What is the new badge of belonging that authenticates Christian reconciliation? As reconciliation with God is validated by a corresponding life-change (Eph 2:10), reconciliation among believers is verified by its pairing actions (Eph 4:32). And as Jesus insisted (Matt 6:14-15), the gracefully forgiven become the gratefully forgiving and the newly-found outcast becomes the seeking agent, is it not reasonable then to validate ecclesiology by the same breadth? Two additional aspects in the Ephesian letter suggest so: space and time.

Ecclesiology and Space. In terms of space, reconciliation brings prominence to double nearness.¹⁹⁴ First, it answers distance from God with a means of access. “He [Christ] came and preached peace to you who were far away [Gentile] and peace to those who were near [Jew]” (v 17). That access of entry opened by the ascent of the Son into the presence of the Father becomes interpenetrating through the descent of the

¹⁹⁴ This describes more, as the author understands it, than universal catholicity but the church in its concrete local expression.

Spirit: “for through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (v 18 NASB) and thus new actual fusion of a wide assortment of cultures, hues, tribes and nations into one temple. Even those groups that were once hostile – as the Jewish and Gentile believers had been – can assemble in worship where God himself dwells:

In Him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple to the Lord” (Eph 2:20) and “In Him, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God dwells by His Spirit (v 22).

Second, double-nearness answers social alienation by destigmatizing the “distant” Other: “consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of His household” (Eph 2:19).¹⁹⁵ The crucified Christ tore down the imposing barrier, “destroyed the dividing wall of hostility” (v 14).¹⁹⁶ Regardless of the exact nature of that wall of long-standing, it is gone! With its removal, Gentiles stand as equals as naturalized citizens with Israel (Eph 2:11-22) and together they are woven into one new creation. The current of thought clearly runs from

¹⁹⁵ According to Martin, “Both groups, formerly alienated from each other by reason of fierce nationalism, cultural pride, and religious claim, are united to become “one.” That unity finds its locus in the place they now take in God’s family as God’s new humanity. The barrier that divided is broken down, and access to God previously a bone of contention between Gentiles and Jews is declared to stand open to all races. Moreover, the access works on a new plane, since it now betokens the horizontal communication that Christ makes possible. Cultures and classes that had been separated by walls of prejudice and tradition are now opened to one another, and the lines of connection and conversation are established. It is this twofold imagery of a double reconciliation – to God and to our fellow human beings – that is the unique contribution of Ephesians and marks it out as one of the most timely New Testament documents of our day.” Martin, *Ephesians*, 34.

¹⁹⁶ Archaeological testimony that could point to what is sometimes called this “Wall of Partition” was discovered on an inscribed slab by a French explorer in 1871. It read, “No foreigner may pass within the fence and the enclosure round the holy place: if any such be found inside, he will alone be answerable for whatever may happen, since the penalty is death.” Quoted by A. G. Herbert, *The Throne of David: A Study of the Fulfillment of the Old Testament in Jesus Christ and His Church*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1941; republished in Madison, WI: Adult Christian Education Foundation, 1984), 231. Ralph Martin, while not ruling out this view, suggests an alternate interpretation: “The wall that set up hostility is a covert allusion to the Mosaic law and its scribal interpretation. As explained in the *Letter to Aristaeus* (a Jewish second century B.C.E. document), the intention in God’s granting the law to Israel was to protect the nation from the Gentiles and so indirectly to prevent the Gentiles from having access to God because of Israel’s particularism. Hence the Gentiles were said to be “afar” from both Israel and God’s covenant (v. 13). What kept them at a distance was Torah thought of as summed up in its “commandments and regulations” which both defined Israel’s covenant status and made it impossible for non-Jews to enter. The verb “broken down” speaks to that need in the sense of abrogate and abolish (thereby going beyond Rom 10:4). Torah’s role had to be drastically rethought in the post-Pauline Gentile age if the notion and acceptance of a universal church was ever to gain credibility and appeal. Once more the letter blazes a trail that was at the same time necessary and risk-laden.” Martin, *Ephesians*, 34.

their “exclusion” (vv 11-12) to the “abolition of the enmity” (vv 13-15a) to being ushered into the “creation of the new Manhood” (vv 15b-18) and now part of “the city, the family, the temple” (vv 19-22).¹⁹⁷ An ecclesiology of inclusion bears witness to the God who delights in drawing near in his temple with his redeemed reconciled family.

Ecclesiology and Time. The second pair considers the implications of time and sequence of groups entering the church. The Ephesian Letter takes special notice that on the clock of progressive revelation, Gentile inclusion with the people of God reflects a late appearance in history. Does their delayed entrance suggest they were an afterthought in the mind of God? Their annexation came only in the time of appearance, for “an idea antedates its realization.”¹⁹⁸ Theologically, Paul’s sequence of salvation noted in Romans 1:16, “for the Jew first and also to the Greek,” aligns itself with the Abrahamic covenant and underscores God’s faithfulness to Israel for Gentile believers.¹⁹⁹

Conclusions: MEC and the Open Secret. The sequence of Gentile inclusion runs from mystery to open secret. Their reconciliation now places God’s strategic agency of revelation to the world with the MEC. New here is its actual appearance in time when the shroud of mystery crumbled away at the cross. In Ephesians 3 Paul addresses Gentile Christians and describes “the stewardship of God’s grace which was given me for you [Gentiles]” (v 2). The channel by which Paul learned of this was “by

¹⁹⁷ Herbert, *Throne of David*, 231.

¹⁹⁸ William F. Albright and David Noel Freedman, eds., *The Anchor Bible*, vol. 34A, *Ephesians: Translation and Commentary on Chapters 4-6* by Markus Barth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1986), 112. Noting equality between Jews and Gentiles, he qualifies: “Solitary and peace do not prevent Paul from discussing priority and posteriority.”

¹⁹⁹ “If Israel’s election were revoked or no longer mattered, Gentiles would have reason to doubt whether the election in Christ which now manifestly includes them is solid, irrevocable, eternal. ... By pointing to Israel, he shows that God is a Lord who not only gives a promise, but keeps it. Israel is by definition a community of hope and destined to God’s praise (Eph 1:12; cf. Rom 1:2; Acts 23:6; 24:15; 26:6; 28:20; Heb 4 and 11).” Barth, *Ephesians*, 133.

revelation [by which] there was made known to me the mystery" (v 3). That revelation, while progressive in its disclosure like an unfolding drama, sprang from its secrecy into the open with Paul and other apostles: "You can understand my insight into the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit" (vv 5-6 NASB).

This open secret concerning the nations is wide in scope and high in origin. The Gentiles now are "fellow heirs and fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel" (Eph 3: 6). This startling mystery did not spring from a human utopian impulse but on ancient divine plan made public through preaching: "To me, the very least of all saints, this grace was given to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ and to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things" (Eph 3:7-9 NASB).

This indeed had been a well-kept secret. Who saw it coming, the influx of nations flooding into the church except those to whom special revelation was given?²⁰⁰ But now the secret is out. Congregations must ask how it can keep this secret to itself, locked away on pages of Scripture instead of being vividly illustrated in our multiracial congregations? The MEC, on the other hand, rides the cusp of NT revelation. That is, the temporal aspect of biblical revelation as progressive reveals both the patience and faithfulness of God. It is as if God kept his thumb on the end of the hose and then removed it incrementally. In the covenant with Abraham, that thumb restricts the flow to his blessing of one nation with an oath promising a distant future of inclusive blessing. That thumb shifts slightly as chosen prophets cast a stunning vision for a single covenant community. It is removed even more when Jesus manifests God's

²⁰⁰ E.g. to elderly Simeon, Luke 2:26, 27, 31-32 and to "holy and apostles and prophets" (Eph 3:5-6).

groundbreaking range of inclusion of grace through his life, death and resurrection. At Pentecost, finally, that divine thumb was removed altogether, allowing an unimpeded flow through the descent of the Spirit upon the Diaspora church gathered at Jerusalem and later in the house of a Gentile named Cornelius. The “secret” of God’s loving-kindness without national borders, having first begun as a trickle of patient promise, gushing then in a stream of living example now becomes a torrent of present reality and, thus, remains secretive no longer! What then can justify the action of a church that reapplies its thumb when God waited patiently for centuries to remove his? On what basis do we re-veil that which we are called to reveal? Can we legitimately insist upon New Testament soteriology while settling for Old Testament ecclesiology? Should not the residents in the household of faith express salvation for all?

One nagging doubt, nevertheless, might persist. All Christians agree that God in Christ has now acted in history to include the nations into his redeemed fold. It is further agreed that the Gentile world has an equal share in every privilege with the natural-born sons of Abraham. However, does their adoption into this family also mean their inclusion into an MEC? Does such a rendering push the meaning of the text? What would forbid non-Jewish believers, for instance, from worshiping the Messiah solely with other Gentile believers and their Hebrew Christian counterparts following suit, each assembled in their “separate-but-equal” churches? Tensions created by the mixing of cultures in an integrated fellowship can be avoided. Each congregation finds easier consensus on community life with its shared worldview, customs, cuisines and standards of acceptable worship while celebrating equal standing by grace with their siblings gathered just a few blocks away. And, why not? Are we not, apart from this, inviting trouble?

Good reasons exist to consider otherwise.²⁰¹ For starters, unity at that level simply offers nothing new. Secular unity in principle already had found a voice in society, particularly among elites.²⁰² Did the reconciliation through Christ's blood produce only a new ideal, another utopian philosophy on paper that does little to heal ethnic divisions in the real world? What then would set the church apart from society's pursuit of unity? Does not the church possess an enabling divine Source and empowerment for enactment?²⁰³

A more compelling reason exists, however, for not dividing congregations. Had the text stopped at Ephesians 3:9, one might be able to justify an option of separate-but-equal ethnic congregations. Verse 10, however, poses a pricklier problem to this ecclesiology. After announcing, celebrating and arguing that the secret is out that the Gentiles are in, one might ask what vehicle can carry this new information into a society of culture-locked subgroups. How will the secret of the ages now become public property? What channel best conveys this hidden mystery? Verse 10 leaves little room for rival hypotheses: "so the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church ..." Precisely identified, the strategic medium to voice the news of God's international and multicultural church is the Christian community! Markus Barth has it right, "The author is interested not in the fabrication or existence of an invisible

²⁰¹ What is next, a church of just young adults? Or plumbers? Or CEO's? Or athletes? Where does this end and on what principle?

²⁰² Theodore O. Wedel writes, "Stoicism especially delighted in the creation of multiple expressions of the unity of all aspects of life, arguing from the unity of the cosmos to the unity of God, of Being, of Law, of Logos, and of Truth (as in a sentence from Marcus Aurelius...). In the unstable, fissiparous society of the Roman Empire the quest for a principle of unity was pursued with a truly desperate earnestness on all levels, theoretical and practical alike." George A. Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreters Bible*, vol. 10, *Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians*, by Theodore O. Wedel (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 686.

²⁰³ Alternative formulas for unity prove to be elusive in their attainment. Marx would later write of utopias of the State that have resulted in mass tragedy. Noble concepts of utopian society already are bound in books and often touted by celebrities, but not embodied in community.

unity but in the factual manifestation and enjoyment of oneness.”²⁰⁴ Delivery of this message is not packaged through sermonic oratory for the ear, but ordinary people gathering in community for the eye. While its perfect form awaits the coming age, it is the will of God now to “earnestly keep the unity of the Spirit” (Eph 4:3) of the body rather than to postpone it. Today’s church must vigilantly bring God’s ancient mystery out into the light so that ethnic and cultural diversity becomes the norm for the church. In 2010, two millennia later, still a secret? God forbid! An inclusive church must not distinguish itself among other churches, but stand as a beacon of hope against a society of tightly knit ethnic communities colliding with one another. The church, then, as the ongoing agent of divine revelation, illustrates in pews what it proclaims in pulpits. The functioning MEC constitutes the greatest peace sign on earth, not with two fingers but with two reconciliations. Its ethnic fusion will stand as a fallible yet indisputable witness to its divine infusion. It exists to make God’s long-awaited, hidden “mystery” conspicuous!

Extraordinary theological revelation such as this calls for demanding social adjustments. This, in turn, lead pastors into a relentless pursuit of supernatural resources in prayer. On the heels of this stunning picture of the church, Paul prayed that God would awaken it to the outermost reaches of divine love, swelling it to the size of its God rather than shrinking to the norms of its culture. “For this reason ... I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God” (Eph 3:14-19). A more urgent request is difficult to conceive than for Christians to know the Messiah’s love in its full dimensions and that their imagination be captivated by this theology of the church without ethnic boundaries (3:14-19).

²⁰⁴ Barth, *Ephesians*, 463.

The reconciling blood of the Messiah, then, forms one reconciled body in the world as a living testimony to his grace. The book of Ephesians does not stop there but offers another basis for unity.

Part 2: Seven Bonds of Fusion Pointing to an Indivisible Trinitarian Ecclesiology

By what means do people find meaningful connection in a disconnected culture?

The book of Ephesians presents the church in an Empire with inadequate bonding influences:

Despite the external political and economic unity brought about by the consolidation of Roman power, individuals felt little sense of social integration or of belonging. Instead, in a cosmopolitan environment, old traditions and allegiances, including religious ones, were seen as inadequate, and many people felt uprooted and alienated.²⁰⁵

How are congregations held together as a single body celebrating their spiritual identity in Christ without erasing secondary identities of individuality or ethnic kinship? A typical Sunday morning at GRIF will see worshipers assemble from about 15 different nationalities or ethnic groups. These are indigenous Americans of African, Hispanic, and European descent as well those who have immigrated from Albania, India, Cuba, China, Brazil, Nepal/Bhutan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Nigeria, Sudan, Mexico, and one Jew. This mixture of cultures and traditions, simultaneously beautiful and bewildering, prompts an honest question: "What do we share in common?" What holds us together?²⁰⁶ The apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:4 lists seven "ones," transcending bonding agents uniting diverse cultures in a MEC: "There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism,

²⁰⁵ Glenn Barker, David A. Hubbard, Ralph P. Martin and John D. W. White, eds., *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 42, *Ephesians*, by Andrew T. Lincoln (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1990), lxxxiv.

²⁰⁶ While allegiances of some are to Hindu, Buddhist or Islamic religions, we regard them as socially belonging to our church family while awaiting their spiritual inclusion. See Appendix 8, "Five Degrees of Belonging."

one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all" (ESV). How are we to understand this unique NT list? Some observations are in order.

First, its larger context in the letter follows the doctrinal section of Ephesians 1-3 which uses Trinitarian threads to weave together the basis and universal scope of salvation with the creation of the reconciled Christian community. Its immediate context places this list between admonitions to preserve the unity of the Spirit (4:1-3) and provisions from which apostles, prophets and pastor-teachers apply to Christ's church by which it realizes its flourishing unity in Christ (4:7-13).

Second, as to its function, this list identifies the vital core elements that are present in the church anywhere and everywhere. Beneath the surface of multiplied cultures lies this bedrock of unifying rudiments upon which its members stand united. That seven-fold substratum provides an ecclesiological flooring for the MEC can benefit the community in a variety of ways.

Moorings. In a sea of different cultures, they can protect the church from doctrinal drift and the winds of ideological change. In environments where diverse worldviews flourish, these theological points of reference affix the church to its unchanging realities. Pastors and teachers can mine each of them for their durable applications.

Intersections. They provide Christian testimony in an international context with a common language. Since there is but one salvation, we may expect to hear consistency within richly dynamic expressions of devotion from a wide spectrum of cultures. Once unpacked of their meanings, this "vocabulary of the Way" can be recognized by fellow travelers. Because of the larger story of redeeming grace (Eph 2:1-10, etc.) each story will be unique, but none completely foreign.

Third, the list is composed of concrete nouns rather than verbal exhortations.”²⁰⁷

Introduced with “there is,” a statement of fact, expresses current reality rather than an abstract unity to be pursued or policies to enact. Following on the heels of the exhortation “to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace,” they provide church leaders with a sturdy framework to resource that worthy endeavor.²⁰⁸

Fourth, Paul repeats the number “one” seven times. By limiting each to a mere “one” does not deny the existence of others, but instead distinguishes one among the many. For example, while there are many spirits and spiritualities (1 Cor 12:10; 1 Thess 5:19-22; 1 John 4:1) for us there is one animating Spirit emerging from the Trinity. Numerous earthly bodies exist, but for us only one body of Christ. People put their faith in countless projects and schemes, yet for us there is only one faith that taps into saving grace. Demanding masters vie for allegiance in any society, but sole allegiance for us is reserved for *Kyrios Christos*. There are many fathers, from exemplary role models to deadbeat dads, but for us there is only the glorious “Father,” revealed by Jesus intimately as “Abba.” These differentiate the church from any other societal group.

Fifth, the list of objects or subjects totals seven. Is this a random number or should it be understood as having special significance? *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* suggests two ideas of consequence. First, numbers indeed carry “symbolic meaning in biblical usage” and of all numbers, seven carries the greatest

²⁰⁷ S. D. F. Salmond’s comment separates this from the exhortation in the preceding verse: “This [list] is not to be taken as part of the exhortation... It is a positive statement, made all the more impressive by the lack of *gar* or any connecting particle, and giving the objective ground, or basis in fact, on which the walk in lowliness, meekness, longsuffering and loving forbearance is urged, and of which it should be the result.” W. Robertson Nicoll (ed.), *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, vol 3, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, by S. D. F. Salmond (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 21.

²⁰⁸ The existence of these seven core unities does not suggest they are perfectly realized in congregational life. They are placed in the hands of Christ’s ordained ministers to “build up the body of Christ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:12). As demographic or ideological changes occur in their ministry settings, a pastor can stay the course by making these a central focus.

importance. It conveys “completeness or totality.”²⁰⁹ Second, “in a series of seven the seventh item is often ennobled and given climactic ranking.”²¹⁰ On the Ephesian list, standing seventh is “God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6 ESV). In addition to the “Father” who is listed as seventh but ranked as first, the “Lord,” a title for Jesus, is placed fourth and, thereby, occupying the list’s central position and the “Spirit” sits as second just behind the “body,” presumably the object being described, which tops the list. What do we make of this? It implies totality, expressing both divine perfection and fullness and connects the unity of the church to that of the Godhead. To R. Kent Hughes, it points to “the divine origin of Christian unity.” He writes, “The important thing to see is that it teaches us that our unity is rooted in the Holy Trinity.”²¹¹ Ralph P. Martin labels the list “rudimentary Trinitarian faith,” noting the seven repetitions of “one” as a “triad of couplets” and “trinity of unities” to which are “sealed” by the climactic addition of one triune God.²¹² The prepositions used to describe the Father comprehend the entire Trinity. Martin writes, “‘One God’ – a monotheism that Christians share with Israel (1 Cor 8:6) – who is known in his self-revelation as the Father ‘over all’ in creation, as Son ‘through all’ (the preposition is one of mediation, as in 2:18), and as Spirit who is ‘in all’ the family of God.”²¹³ Ascending to the seventh and prominent place

²⁰⁹ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, s. v. “Seven” (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, electronic ed., 2000), 775.

²¹⁰ Duriez, et al., “Seven,” *Biblical Imagery*, 775. Examples in which the seventh in a series is given prominence or is placed in a climactic position are the Sabbath day, the seventh sign of the Gospel of John is Jesus’ death and resurrection (John 2:18-19; John 20:30), the seven seal-openings (Rev 6:1-8:1), the trumpet blasts (Rev 8:2-9:11) and the Enoch being named as “seventh” in descent from Adam (Jude 14).”

²¹¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word: Ephesians – The Mystery of the Body of Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1990), 124.

²¹² Ralph P. Martin, ed., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon*, by Ralph P. Martin (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1991), 48. This seven-fold repetition of “one” represents “the focal point of ecumenical unity for which modern Christendom still is searching.”

²¹³ Martin, *Interpretation*, 48.

is God the Father. Salmond notes the progression of these verses “from Church to Christ, and from Christ to God who is One in the highest and most absolute sense – the One source of life and good in all His people, the one to whom both Christ and the Spirit are related.”²¹⁴ These seven elements forming the bedrock for the MEC also evoke doxology to its Triune Source:

The statements regarding God’s oneness are made in a tone of admonition, supplication, worship. They reflect not the attitude of onlookers but the rapture of enthusiasts. Those uttering the confession are bound by its implications. They speak as the “body” animated by the “Spirit” and appointed to march on the way of “hope.” “Faith” and “baptism” tie them to the “Lord.” “In all things” and persons they are willing to recognize the dominion, presence, and operation of “God the Father.”²¹⁵

What corresponding points does the Trinity have with the church and how can these form cohesion among its members while expressing personal and ethnic identity?

Trinity – Variety and Multiformity in God

On the diverse nature of the Trinity, Markus Barth becomes exuberant:

It is not the magnificence and mystery of the number “One” which determine the confession of God. Rather the astonishing manifestation of God the Spirit, Son, and Father makes them cry out; One! Unique! United! Unifying! Faithful! While the saints confess God’s uniqueness, faithfulness, omnipotence, etc., they acknowledge variety and multiformity in God himself.

He is the living God, not a dead number. God’s oneness is the communion of Father, Son, and Spirit; it is the unity of these three: the mystery of the trinity.²¹⁶

Miroslav Volf, in a valiant attempt to rescue modern Protestantism from individualism, or what he calls “a fellowship based on will,”²¹⁷ writes: “If salvation takes place between the lonely soul and its God... then it is individualistic... By contrast, the Catholic and

²¹⁴ Salmond, *Ephesians*, 22.

²¹⁵ Martin, *Interpretation*, 466.

²¹⁶ Martin, *Interpretation*, 466.

²¹⁷ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 197.

Orthodox traditions insist on the essential sociality of salvation. Salvation is communion with God and human beings.”²¹⁸ What creates that “sociality of salvation?” He writes:

Because the Christian God is not a lonely God, but rather a communion of the three persons, faith leads human beings into the divine *communio*. One cannot, however, have a self-enclosed communion with the triune God – a “foursome,” as it were – for the Christian God is not a private deity. Communion with this God is at once also communion with those others who have entrusted themselves in faith to the same God.²¹⁹

Drawing heavily from John’s Gospel, Volf finds sociality of salvation to arise from the love emanating from communion with the Triune God:

Jesus’ high-priestly prayer, that his disciples might become one “as you, Father, are in me and I am in you may they also be in us” (John 17:21), presupposes communion with the triune God, mediated through faith and baptism, and aims at its eschatological consummation... The relations between the many in the church must reflect the mutual love of the divine persons.²²⁰

Unity and diversity in the church finds its analogy in the Trinity. Responding to the popular idea asserting that parallels to the Trinity outside of God do not exist, Volf points to “the indwelling of the triune God in the world. Any reflection on the relation between Trinity and church must take into account both God’s uniqueness and the world’s purpose in becoming the dwelling of the triune God, which corresponds to this triune God himself.”²²¹ Baptism itself is a Trinitarian event so that the Trinity becomes for the church a “determining reality.”²²² No person then can be “fully initiated into the Christian faith without being socialized into a Christian church.”²²³ Entrance into the church does not begin on the human side with the duties of covenant: “*The Spirit of God*, acting through the word of God and the sacraments (“from above”), is the real subject of the

²¹⁸ Volf, *Likeness*, 172.

²¹⁹ Volf, *Likeness*, 173.

²²⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 195.

²²¹ Volf, *Likeness*, 192.

²²² Volf, *Likeness*, 195.

²²³ Volf, *Likeness*, 195.

genesis of the church. It is the Spirit who constitutes the church. *People*, however, must accept the gifts of God in faith...*they* must come together, and *they* must remain together."²²⁴ Trinitarian clarity, not in the sense of understanding God but of apprehending the revelation of God, is necessary to associate its correspondences with personhood and ecclesiology. These analogies illuminate the MEC.

First, the Tri-unity dissolves neither personhood nor individuality. Some conceive Trinity as "one substance gains the upper hand over the three persons" making the three "redundant." Regarding individuality, "the persons seem to dissolve into relations; the Father becomes fatherhood; the Son, sonship; and the Spirit, procession."²²⁵ Both aspects of relation and differentiation is present. From Jurgen Moltmann's insight, "Here there are no persons without relations; but there are no relations without persons either. Person and relation are complementary"²²⁶ in mutually affirming ways.

Second, the oneness of the Trinity is grounded in the interior abiding of its Persons. The cohesion of the three Persons consists more than in their interdependence but "mutually internal abiding and interpenetration."²²⁷ Jesus often refers to the shared reality that "the Father is in me and I am in the Father" (John 10:38; cf. 14:10-11; 17:21):

[It] refers to the reciprocal interiority of the Trinitarian persons. In every divine person as a subject, the other persons also indwell; all mutually permeate one another, though in doing so they do not cease to be distinct persons... This is why both statements can be made: 'Father and Son are in one another,' and 'Christians are in them' ('in us' – plural!; John 17:21). Being in one another does not abolish Trinitarian plurality;²²⁸

²²⁴ Volf, *Likeness*, 176.

²²⁵ Volf, *Likeness*, 205.

²²⁶ Jurgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (NY, NY: Harper & Row, 1981), 172; quoted in Volf, *Likeness*, 205.

²²⁷ Volf, *Likeness*, 208.

²²⁸ Volf, *Likeness*, 209. From this "interiority of the divine persons" is their "catholicity." Drawing from John 10:38 and 14:2-10, he contends that "the one divine person is not only itself, but rather carries with itself also the other divine persons... The Son is Son only insofar as the Father and the Spirit indwell him; without this interiority of the Father and the Spirit, there would be no Son." Volf, *Likeness*, 209.

While this reciprocity cannot happen at the human level,²²⁹ “the interiority of personal characteristics can correspond to the interiority of the divine persons,” for:

Each person gives of himself or herself to others, and each person in a unique way takes up others into himself or herself. This is the process of the mutual internalization of person characteristics occurring in the church through the Holy Spirit indwelling Christians. The Spirit opens them to one another and allows them to become catholic persons in their uniqueness.²³⁰

Mutual interconnection at that depth among persons obviously requires proximity to them, but of theological significance, mystical union with God. Jesus’ prayer,

“as you, Father, are in me and I am in you” is continued not by “may they also be in one another,” but rather by “may they also be in us”...It is not the mutual perichoresis of human beings, but rather the indwelling of the Spirit common to everyone that makes the church into a communion corresponding to the Trinity...²³¹

In summary, Ephesians’ seven-fold ecclesiology presents fragmented society with a concrete product and reflection of the Triune God. This single body exhibits differentiation rather than uniformity, a community of mutual love and interdependence, one entered through the Trinitarian event of baptism pointing to its genesis of divine initiative rather than human will. It retains individuality without dissolving relations and, by the union of its members with the indwelling Christ through the Spirit, members share interiority that opens one to another. All praise is due to the Father over us, the Son with us and the Spirit in us. Trinitarian correlations illuminate deeper connections within the international church and foster affinity among its members. Otherwise, the MEC, lacking in a single cohering culture, will gravitate into coexisting parallel societies as a fellowship without depth that is united in appearance only.

²²⁹ “Human persons are always external to one another as subjects...The indwelling of other persons is an exclusive prerogative of God.” Volf, *Likeness*, 211.

²³⁰ Volf, *Likeness*, 212.

²³¹ Volf, *Likeness*, 213.

Landmark 9: Hope Realized – Eschatological Multiethnic Community

Nothing is yet in its true form.

—C. S. Lewis

Stephen A. Rhodes employs an apt word picture describing the end of the highway of special revelation: "God's eschatological family reunion."²³² The Road leads home. The image of reunion accurately depicts its corporate heartbeat and joyful celebration. The family is back with the Father and all is right with the family. Let the End begin.

How does this impact the MEC? Two terms to help us grasp the nature of Christian hope are totality and continuity. Stated succinctly, it is comprehensive renovation, encompassing the entire cosmos, rather than individualistic. Biblical hope completes the story of redemption and brings each of its elements to fulfillment. While the work of justification, redemption, regeneration and sanctification will all reach their glorified fruition, these too easily get reduced to narrow individualism. By contrast, God's reconciliation in its dual dimensions, with one God and his church will constitute the heart of God's eschatological reign and has direct bearing on the MEC.²³³ It is worth noting that while ethnicity remains, the church will not be partitioned denominationally.

Double reconciliation stressing two-fold nearness will manifest itself in two ways. First, vertical reconciliation points to an unprecedented nearness of the redeemed family before God: "Behold, the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them" (Rev 21:3). This epic event culminates God's prior motions throughout salvation history to close the gap separating

²³² Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (Downers Grove, Ill: IVP, 1988), 25.

²³³ The manner in which each soteriological facet begun in Christ reaches fruition in its glorified state is described in Joseph P. Knight, "Hope Against Hope: Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim and Christian Hope," (Th.M. thesis, Calvin Theological Seminary, 2000), 16-35.

sinful man from himself.²³⁴ Indeed, salvation's highway from alienation to reconciliation reminds us of the paramount goal of the *missio Dei* as nearness to God.

Any idea of heaven, however resplendent in its accoutrements, that becomes divorced from the God of heaven is not a Christian heaven. It cannot be reduced to immortals rolling in rubies and diamonds like lottery winners, or recipients of an eternal vacation package. Nor is it an experience that one could have if only in possession of sufficient means. Heaven represents the true home for the believer, the place where God himself is the Centerpiece and abiding Host... It is precisely for this companionship that believers are presently being formed.²³⁵

This celebrated nearness, however, is far more than a private rendezvous. The horizontal counterpart of reconciling grace will follow. God's pervasive presence will heal all rifts in the New Society issuing in the MEC in its superlative form. How is it that conflicts, so prevalent today, will cease? Peace will not arrive by the elimination of difference, the erasing of ethnic nor individual identity. For the human family in its entire international splendor will stand together as one before a greater presence:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, "Salvation belongs to our God who sits upon the throne, and to the Lamb!" (Rev 7:9)

Hope is corporate (1 Thess 2:19-20), for "Christ died for us...that we might live together with him" (1 Thess 5:10). Each culture, great and small, will be present, contributing its praise while held in penultimate check by the presence of the One greater than any nation at its center, standing head and shoulders above all nations as the doxological focal point. The curse of national religion will be forever put to rest.

²³⁴ The redeemed family will reflect with gratitude on God's earlier overtures of mercy, perhaps beginning with the Tent of Meeting with its coarse goatskin in the wilderness (Exod 40) where Moses encountered God's presence (Exod 33:11, 18f). As God's people, they could celebrate their unique relationship with God as they did in Deuteronomy 4:7, "What nation has a God so near?" They will especially remember the nearness of God through Immanuel, wrapped in the skin of the Son of Mary in whom the divine glory tabernacled (John 1:14). It will remember the day of Pentecost when divine nearness took a major step closer, from "with us" to "in us" as the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Trinity, descended to create an international temple in which he would reside, set apart, shape and send out. This MEC of the Spirit had stood as a signpost amid fragmented society of what lay ahead.

²³⁵ Knight, "Hope," 34.

The MEC stands in society then as no relic from the past but ahead of its time as a vanguard of what will be when God's kingdom fully arrives.²³⁶ When interethnic conflicts boil over viciously in the world, the MEC rises up simultaneously as a shelter of refuge and an anchor of hope. Seen in this way, eschatology becomes an appreciable asset countering an increasingly degrading culture as predicted by Jesus and Paul (Matt 24:3ff; 2 Tim 3:1-9, etc.). Despite widespread grief incurred in the coming day when the cup of cultural iniquity threatens to destroy all that is good, inclusive congregations of redeemed persons will have a redeeming effect on culture, shining like stars in a crooked and depraved generation.

Conclusion

The MEC stands solidly on the highway of biblical revelation. It appears at a fixed time in history, awaiting the forces that inaugurated its existence and enriched its composition. It stands at the end of the highway, delayed until after the Abrahamic covenant announced the universal span of its blessings. It followed the Mosaic covenant that began forming a people who would mirror the God of life amid culture of death. It was stirred by the prophetic chorus heralding a coming Messiah through whom God would include the nations into his redeemed community. It awaited the appearance of the Messiah, who in life graced unholy ground with the footprints of God, in death demolished walls of enmity with his sacred blood, and in whose ascendant victory became enthroned as Lord, peerless in global authority and perfect in local pattern for individual and corporate life. Finally, it arrived subsequently to two historic descents of the Spirit, first upon Diaspora Jews at Pentecost and then a Gentile home in which

²³⁶ A GRIF member, a woman in her thirties, Sheri R., when asked on a survey what excited her about the church's vision, wrote, "I feel blessed knowing I am part of a bigger picture for the future of God's kingdom and that our church is resembling what I picture heaven to look like." GRIF Member Survey, Winter 2010.

Jewish believers sat awkwardly with non-Jews to witness together the multiethnic temple of God, the beginning of many different peoples becoming one.

This author wonders if many of us have reset the clock of salvation history to an earlier period by establishing monocultural and ethnic-specific congregations. Have we overlooked the path of mission to the margins marked out by the one we call Lord? Have we partially obscured the light of reconciliation through the one we call Peace? Or have we perhaps settled for convenient predictability instead of a more dynamic community through the one we call Spirit? Given the long trail of divinely inspired antecedent events leading finally to the MEC, how can we escape if we neglect so great an ecclesiology?

CHAPTER 3

RELIGIONS, VIEWED FROM THE REDEMPTIVE HISTORY PERSPECTIVE, ARISE IN PART BY GENERAL REVELATION AND STAND IN NEED OF THE GOSPEL

From one ancestor he made all nations... and he allotted
the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places
where they would live, so that they would search for God
and perhaps grope for him and find him...

--Acts 17:26-27

A man without a sense of worship is like a
water buffalo listening to an orchestra.

-- Muslim villager, Island of Java

The present chapter shifts our attention away from the nature of the MEC to two important questions concerning the religions surrounding it. First, if the multiethnic church arose from successive landmark events in redemptive history, where does that leave the religions of the world of which Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam represent the largest followings? If not created by the revealed Word, how did they arise? While this question merits more than what the scope of this paper can exhaustively deliver, we will present religion as viewed from the redemptive history perspective as arising from the interplay of four stimuli: the diffusion of general revelation, the impulse of the *imago Dei*, the idolatrous heart which constitutes the core of original sin and the overtures of the Holy Spirit in prevenient grace. Second, how are we to define the relationship of the gospel to these religions? It will be argued that with the advent of the Gospel came a seismic shift in the status of religion and suggests four new relationships for missional purpose. These questions have a direct bearing on our central issue of how churches can reach out to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims. While GRIF's main approach has been to build bridges of friendship and compassion rather than through apologetics, sooner or later loving actions lead to pointed questions about how the gospel relates to their religions. A basic theology of world religions, rather than veering off topic, is integral to

MEC ministry and deserves a hearing, although brief.

What is Religion?

The hazard of defining religion is duly noted by theologian J. Andrew Kirk: "Only the foolhardy or the audacious would attempt to define religion" because "a definition given is either too precise to encompass all legitimate manifestations or too general to be a description of anything."¹ He insists, nevertheless, that today's pluralistic mission field makes such audacity to be the one thing needed.² Gerald J. Pillay concurs by insisting that "an authentic Christian reflection can no longer ignore other cultures and other religions."³ Paul Griffith logically asserts that before religion can be compared to the gospel, it must be defined.⁴ Clarifying the links between A and B demands clarity on what one is apart from the other. What then is religion?

Religion is Fallen Humanity's Upward Movement towards God

Viewed from the redemptive history perspective, we contend that religion arises from the interplay of four dynamic realities: the wide diffusion of general revelation, the

¹ J. Andrew Kirk, *What is Mission? Theological Explorations* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 122.

² "Of all the topics encompassed by the study of mission none is more fundamental ... than the relation between Christian and non-Christian faiths." Kirk, *Mission*, 118.

³ Gerald J. Pillay, "No God's-Eye View: Tradition, Christian Hermeneutics, and Other Faiths," in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 133. On the nature of religion, see 118-142. For an overview of the types of religion, see Diane Obenchain and Max L. Stackhouse, eds., *God and Globalization*, vol. 3, *Christ and the Dominions of Civilization* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2002). In the Introduction Max L. Stackhouse underscores the necessity of understanding religious influences on cultures and societies everywhere (10ff) and examines the idea of parity between coexisting religions (18-19). Diane Obenchain, in "The Study of Religion and the Coming Global Generation," presents a historical overview of religion as a concept (59f) and provides an excellent summary of religions (92-96).

⁴ Paul J. Griffiths, "An Evangelical Theology of Religions?" in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, John G. Stackhouse, Jr., ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 162-167. He observes that religion "is a term of almost no importance in Scripture. As far as the New Testament is concerned, there is no Greek word obviously rendered by *religion* in English...*Religion*, then, is a term of almost no scriptural importance, and where it is used it bears few or no similarities to standard modern usage." Griffiths cited in Stackhouse, *No Other Gods*, 164.

endowments of human creation in the *imago Dei*, the idolatrous delusions of original sin and the pull of the Holy Spirit in prevenient grace. Does legitimization of general revelation give credence to religion and, thus, somehow compete with the gospel? The moment one yields to the possibility that religion might be regarded an “upward movement” pulled by general revelation, one can almost hear the adamant “No!” of Karl Barth in the background. Is this not an evangelical slippery slope into liberal Protestantism? Let us examine the biblical text and then return to these questions. This position on religion in no way implies a kind of “natural theology” arising out of man and independent of God but, to the contrary, a response however unwittingly to divine revelation and human creation.

Religion Responds to God's Universal Disclosure in General Revelation

From the redemptive history perspective religions are the human response to a transcendent awareness arising from God's universal disclosure through general revelation and creation. The God who lives in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6:16) does not relish his privacy but freely unveils his nature by way of a boundless self-disclosure (Ps 19:1).⁵ “General” revelation is distinguished from “special” in terms of its immense range and timeless quality. The biblical record avoids disparaging it as an inferior mode of God's self-disclosure, emphasizing instead its universal accessibility. Clearly, God desires to be recognized and sought in worship by all who bear his image. Through what specific channels does he make his existence, attributes and will for human beings understood?

⁵ Cf. Deut 29:29. Where the psalmist emphasizes the wide availability of the knowledge of God's existence through general revelation, Moses points to the sufficiency of God's knowledge and his will through special revelation.

COSMOS: External witness through nature and science. First, God gives all persons the light of creation. By observing the physical world of nature and the findings of the empirical sciences, the Creator should be held in awe and revered with gratitude. Despite his invisibility, “what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made...” (Rom 1:19-20). Creation, like a work of art, bears the signature of the Artist. There is no hint of deficiency or misleading cues in general revelation, for God’s “eternal power and divine nature...have been clearly seen.” Creation, a canvass of clarity, mirrors the unseen attributes of its Maker sufficiently lucid so that only “fools say in their hearts, ‘There is no God’” (Ps 14:1). Nature serves a didactic end by pointing beyond itself, teaching ultimate truths and inspiring worshipful devotion. The Creator’s work is obvious, says the Book of Job, so much so that even plants and animals instruct that “the hand of the LORD has done this” (Job 12:7-10; cf. 37:5-7). Jesus often let nature teach men about their benevolent Father (Pss 8, 19:1-6, etc.). Scholars and laymen alike have deduced divine truth from the created order.⁶ When Richard J. Plantinga asserts, then, that “one cannot open one’s eyes in the universe without seeing God” because “creation is the theater of divine glory,”⁷ he goes beyond sentimental exaggeration but expresses a fundamental biblical premise.

⁶References to discerning God through physical laws and nature are legion. For classical writers in the West, see Robert M. Hutchins, ed., *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 7, “Timaeus,” by Plato, 46 and “Laws X,” 758-9; vol. 12, “The Discourses of Epictetus,” by Epictetus who said, “God not only put color into things. He gave man eyes to see it” (110; cf. 122); vol. 4, “Pericles,” by Anaxagoras of Clazomenae (123, 192, 435); vol. 25, “Essays,” by Montaigne (211-12, 238-9, 247-248); William Harvey discerned the “Creator [is] proclaimed through the structure of animals” (421); vol. 34, Newton finds evidence for God’s changelessness through mathematical principles (34, 369-371); vol. 35, G. Berkeley observes how the uniform working of nature points to God (418, 442-444); vol. 37, “Tom Jones,” by playwright Henry Fielding (186), etc. (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952).

⁷ Richard J. Plantinga, “God So Loved the World: Theological Reflections on Religious Plurality in the History of Christianity,” in *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment*, ed. David W Baker (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2004), 116.

AWARENESS AND CONSCIENCE: Internal witness through the “seed of religion” planted within. The second dynamic factor is the light of moral law through which individuals possess an interior awareness to enable responsible behavior. Law suggests a Lawgiver, linking this internal monitor to an inner sense of One greater than self to whom they will be held accountable. Paul writes,

Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law [Mosaic law], do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them (Rom 2:14-15 NIV).

This interior faculty polices the conscience as a moral guardian against transgression.

But it is more. Plantinga clarifies the nature of this interior light:

There is in the human mind by natural instinct, an awareness of divinity (*sensus divinitatis*); people sense through the very fact of their humanness, through human experience, that there is a God. A certain God-orientation is in the very constitution of our human being.

...God, in order to remove the pretense of ignorance (Rom 1), implanted in all human beings a seed of religion (*semen religionis*). Idolatry is proof that all have such a seed.⁸

The external empirical evidence of nature combined with the “voice” heard in the private chambers of the heart leaves no human being destitute of divine knowledge. People living at all times and in all places are made cognizant-capable of a God of power, goodness and justice.⁹ These factors explain divine awareness yet they stop short of providing a rationale for the origin of religion or worship.

⁸ Plantinga, “God So Loved the World,” *Religious Plurality*, 116.

⁹ Stackhouse, *God and Globalization*, 27.

Human Beings as God's Image Bearers were Created for Interpersonal Relationship with God to Love, Serve and Represent Him

Theological recognition designed for doxological response was engendered by anthropological endowment. Animals can detect a Creator's world but only humans can discern the Creator's hand. Different responsiveness between species to the same data suggests something deeper than varying degrees of intelligence. Biblically speaking, it points to another classification differentiating humanity, one stemming from a universal transcendent ontology, endowed as God's image bearers (Gen 1:26-7). Such reality squares with human experience, explaining the universal impulse for some kind of transcendent connection. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes finds futility in the unsatisfying pursuits of this life precisely because "God has set eternity within the human heart" (Eccl 3:11 TNIV).¹⁰ That "seed of religion" mentioned above, animating the capacity for making sound moral choices with an accompanying accountability (Rom 2:14-15), is intuiting and surmising. The *Imago Dei*, on the other hand, describes something beyond such cognizance and points to a capacity for inter-personal relationship. It is knowing and being known. It is the ability to say "I love you" and to hear back. The seed of religion says "I believe in God" while the *imago Dei* cries out "Be Thou my vision." The Genesis record puts this in personal terms. That inner impulse for the eternal One explains religion's necessity and why the search for personal happiness within finite creation is so unsatisfactory. It sheds light as well on why a vague God awareness invariably comes up short and creates restlessness; humans were made for something more. Divine image-bearers who had walked with God in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8), capable to love, serve and represent God should, by virtue of that endowment, long to draw near.

¹⁰ For the sake of brevity, see Chapter 2, Landmark 1 for a discussion of the *imago Dei*.

World religion, then, viewed from the redemptive history perspective, is a product of general revelation and the endowments of human creation. Today's pervasive presence of temples, mosques and churches should come as no surprise, for the wide availability of this divine self-disclosure makes the religious impulse the rule rather than the exception. This explains the vestiges of religion unearthed from the past. God-orientation is woven into the warp and woof of humanity. The presence of truth, beauty, love, morality, justice and wisdom that we find in sacred literature everywhere is a fact owing to the God of universal disclosure and anthropological endowment from the same creative hand. More pressing questions focus around not its ubiquity, but the wide variance of religious beliefs and the sufficiency of its provisions. Is religion enough?

Religion Exposes the Inner Condition of All Humanity in Its State of Alienation

On the basis of threefold divine revelation – divine works amplified above in the cosmos to inspire grateful awe, divine voice whispered within alerting the mind of Another to whom accountability is owed, and divine image stamped on all human beings inviting trustful intimacy, direct communication and cooperative service – one might assume that the ardent quest for God would be humanity's most natural trait. Human experience, however, brings even greater mysteries. One ponders the puzzling maze of multiple religions that, despite emerging from the same complex of revelatory data, espouse contradictory claims.¹¹ Another considers the absence of religious impulse expressed by many against this plenitude of general revelation.

¹¹ Scholarly, charitable yet honest treatments of substantive contradictions found in religious literature, see Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1991); Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998). Theological engagement between evangelical Christianity with Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam that is both scholarly and lively is in Timothy C. Tennent, *Christianity at the Religious Roundtable: Evangelicals in Conversation with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2002).

How does the Bible account for these human dilemmas posed by religion's confusing proliferation on the one hand and the agonizing disinclination (or, apparently, perfectly content) on the other? Scripture traces these back to a single point of origin when sin entered the world, the heart of which being self-idolatry manifesting itself through a wide range of liabilities (see Gen 8:21; Prov 12:20; Jer 17:9; Mark 7:14-23; Rom 1:18-32, etc.). Forfeited in that moment was not the ability to recognition of God's existence but to encounter him directly and intimately.

What impact did the Fall have upon this revelatory triad? Obviously, the sun kept shining so as to give daily testimony to the continuance of general revelation. We find nothing in the biblical record of sudden amnesia by which divinity was erased from human memory. That "seed of religion" remained, for even Cain the murderer engaged in conversation with God (Gen 4:1-16) and the sons of Seth started building altars and "calling on the name of the Lord" (Gen 4:26). According to Romans 1:19, God's continuing revelation could produce more than a bare awareness of his existence but his very character as well, encompassing divine attributes as well as divine fact. Both aspects were pervasively present with convincing clarity to surpass mere recognition and warrant grateful worship. The efficacy of general revelation, then, is affirmed no uncertain terms, for "that which is known about God is evident within them" (NASB).¹² That which rises to clear prominence about God is "his eternal power and his divine nature." Theologian William M. Greathouse observes,

First, we are aware of our dependence upon a Power (*dynamis*) that presides over our existence. Through it we come into being, and in the face of it we know

¹² "...what may be known about God..." (Rom 8:19 NIV) externally through the sphere of nature makes an internal impression with an unmistakable capacity for comprehension "manifest in them" (*phaneron estin en autois*). Greathouse states that "the Greek expression means simply that any revelation must pass through human consciousness... 'Divine truth' should not be thought of as an abstract body of useful information." Greathouse, William M., *Romans 1-8: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, electronic ed.).

our nothingness. Moreover, when we consider the fleeting temporality of our own existence, this power we perceive to be eternal.

Second, we perceive the divine nature (*theiotes*). The universe is not moved by blind power but by power that is divine in character – it is God. That is, what is “made plain” is that God is God and not a weak mortal. Observation of created life is sufficient to show that creation does not provide a key to its own existence.¹³

Given how God consistently revealed himself to human beings “since the creation of the universe” (Rom 1:20), what blocked or distorted their perception of him? Rather than inspiring belief, gratitude and worship, the biblical record paints a picture with starkly contrasting results that are universally disappointing.

Despite all this evidence, Calvin laments, human beings still tend to get God wrong and turn against God. It seems that they fail to see God in God’s works. This leads to the inexorable conclusion that the signs (sparks) in the universe are not enough; we need the full revelation (light) of God. But we do see enough to render us without excuse. God attracts us to divine knowledge, but we refuse; the fault of dullness is ours.¹⁴

The phrase, “but we refuse,” diagnoses the current human condition not as a misapprehension of general revelation but its willful rejection. Greathouse concurs:

Although God cannot be known directly through reason (1 Cor 1:21), he is knowable. This knowledge, however, is not forced upon a passive subject: to learn about God we must adopt a positive and receptive attitude. Creation exists as an invitation to dialogue with God. Certain things may be “clearly seen,” but only if we are willing to see.¹⁵

Humans everywhere have “suppressed the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom 1:18 NASB).

“All humans apart from God’s saving grace are wicked by definition. God’s wrath is outpoured because humans refuse the knowledge of God offered by the Creator.

Unrighteousness and wickedness are but symptoms of a more basic fault”¹⁶ that is aptly captured by Walter Luthi: “All the perversions of life can be traced back to one

¹³ Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*, electronic ed.

¹⁴ Plantinga, “God So Loved the World,” 116.

¹⁵ Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*, 73.

¹⁶ Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*, 73.

fundamental cause, and this original sin is not to be found in the field of morals but in the soil of religion: perversion of life arises from perversion of faith.”¹⁷ Romans 1 sets that “perversion of faith” against a backdrop of idolatry, mapping out a progression that went from the suppression of truth about God to the replacement of his Person with their speculative projections (Rom 1:21) and ludicrous caricatures (Rom 1:23) making the object of their ardent devotion a manufactured fraud (Rom 1:25). Laying beneath the array of auto-designs masquerading as divinities is worship that promotes the self.

Preoccupied with ourselves, we turn away from God as the center of our being and source of our happiness – we turn from divine love into inordinate self-love. We are unwilling to recognize the Lord as the ground of our being; we choose instead to be lord ourselves and to glorify ourselves. This idolatrous setting up of self as the (false) end of life is humankind’s original sin and the source of all our misery.¹⁸

This common human malady of original sin, the idolatry of self, masks itself under the vast multiplicity of idols and religions. People are without excuse. Distortion and dismissal of God trace their causes not to revelation that is made scarce nor aloof detachment on the part of God (Acts 17:27) but to the fixation of self which constitutes our terminal and universal disease.

Brief Assessment of Karl Barth’s View of general revelation and religion. Given this background, what are we to make of general revelation as understood by Karl Barth? What is its value? First, in his chapter, “Religion as Unbelief” in his *Church Dogmatics*, Karl Barth equates religion with idolatry and places both in opposition to the gospel.¹⁹ His rejection of general revelation should be understood against its historical

¹⁷ Walter Luthi, *The Letter to the Romans* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1961), 22; quoted by Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*, 73.

¹⁸ Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*.

¹⁹ “From the standpoint of revelation religion is clearly seen to be a human attempt to anticipate what God in his revelation wills to do and does do. It is the attempted replacement of the divine work by a human manufacture. The divine reality offered and manifested to us in revelation is replaced by a concept of God

backdrop when Enlightenment philosophers bundled general revelation together with “natural theology.” But the latter was a disfigurement of the former by untethering “natural” from its divine means by those theologians. An earlier Reformed theologian, J. H. Bavinck, understood this. In a recently translated anthology, he discusses the Reformed perspective of general revelation in his first chapter, “General Revelation and the Non-Christian Religions:”

They [early Protestants] did not deny the truth of general revelation; on the contrary, they emphatically taught that God revealed himself in creation. They also fervently taught that all humans have *semen religionis*, a seed of religion, which can never be destroyed. However, they vehemently denied that this innate religious sense could ever bring humans to understand the glory and greatness of God.²⁰

Comparing the divergent views of these two Reformed theologians, one wonders if they are thinking of the same thing when discussing general revelation. Both reject “natural theology” as it emerged from the Enlightenment. For Bavinck, the shift to natural religion from revelation reflected the general currents of this post-Enlightenment European transition. Like Barth does later, he correctly contrasts the Reformers with those Enlightenment philosophers at their starting point.²¹ For them, morality, ideas of God and religious sentiment all were grounded in anthropology alone, springing up independently of God from within humanity. Bavinck’s separation of general revelation from natural theology took him in a more positive view of the former while Barth’s finding a more intimate connection between them led him to dismiss it.

arbitrarily and willfully evolved by man. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, eds., *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, by Karl Barth (NY: T & T Clark, 2009), 104.

²⁰ John Bolt, J. Bratt and Paul Visser (eds.), *J. H. Bavinck Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, forthcoming). Used by permission), 128.

²¹ The “starting point of engagement...was the belief that the standard of morality and religion rested in “natural religion” which was a hidden treasure present deep in the consciousness of all humans. Thus, they developed systems of thought based on this idea of “natural religion.”...[that they] believed to be embedded in the human heart, and they show that humans and their qualities were the focus and starting point, not revelation.” Bavinck, *Reader*, 130.

Hendrick Kraemer, while respectful of Barth's views, stated that he "will not and cannot deny that God works and has worked in man outside the Biblical sphere of revelation, but how this has happened he refuses to discuss."²² He espouses that general revelation is a purely divine work and that it actually reaches sinful people.

General revelation can henceforth only mean that God shines revealingly through the works of His creation (nature), through the thirst and quest for truth and beauty, through conscience and the thirst and quest for goodness, which throbs in man even in his condition of forlorn sinfulness, because God is continuously occupying Himself and wrestling with man, in all ages and with all peoples.²³

Bavinck observes that both Barth and Kraemer agree that general revelation exists but disagreed on the effect it has on humans. Can it bless humans? Bavinck answers in the affirmative on the basis of two evidences. The first was the discoveries of a period of innocence, a "glorious primeval age in which there was peace between the gods and men. He hints that there may be "...some kind of universal memory that relates to that which is recorded in Genesis 1-3. Therefore, it is important to note that when considering non-Christian religions one must not only deal with the issue of general revelation but also with the memory of God's revelation within humanity."²⁴ This "memory" is consistent with the breakthrough discoveries of anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt. Schmidt's findings countered the teachings of the evolutionary model of religion, sometimes called the "subjective theory," locating the beginning of religion in man. This portrayal of monotheism as a late historical stage that would eventually dissolve into secularism prevailed in academia despite a glaring lack of ethnographic support. Schmidt employed impeccable ethnographic methods for his day to a wide gamut of

²² Hendrick Kraemer, *The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World* (London: The Edinburgh House Press, 1938), 120; quoted by Bavinck, *Reader*, 135.

²³ Kraemer, *Christian Message*, 125; quoted in Bavinck, *Reader*, 135.

²⁴ Bavinck, *Reader*, 137.

ancient civilizations and produced an opposite conclusion, a progression that evolved from a period of “original monotheism” subsequent to a human fall from innocence.²⁵

Bavinck’s second line of support for general revelation was Scripture itself.

Drawing from Psalm 19:1 and Romans 1:19-20, he concluded that this revelation that God transmits can be humanly received:

Paul clearly teaches the existence of general revelation. But, does this revelation also reach humans? Do humans actually perceive it? Does it stir them? The statements of Paul seems to answer these questions affirmatively; somehow this revelation acts upon humans. Furthermore, universal human reflection on and belief in God, gods or spirits seem to provide a cogent demonstration that humans have always been touched, in some measure, by God’s revelation.²⁶

While stopping short of conferring salvation, general revelation benefits humanity. He cautiously grants that it conveys divine blessings, basing this on Romans 2:14 that Gentiles “do by nature things required by the law.” He adds:

Although people’s response to general revelation usually leads them to create idols as they suppress the truth of God, the presence of general revelation is still a blessing. In other words, even though as Calvin writes, “that man’s nature...is a perpetual factory of idols,”²⁷ at least in idol worship there is some awareness of divine powers, a measure of reverence and awe and a desire for worship.²⁸

False religions for Bavinck offer a marked improvement over secularization because typically they protect life:

This awareness of the divine and the desire for worship is confused and directed towards the wrong object, yet, the worship of these things protect life to some extent, and so, in a sense, are a blessing. This is even more clear when contrasted to the secularization taking place in the West, where the culture is becoming increasingly godless. As T. S. Eliot reflects: ‘men have left God not for other gods, they say, but for no God: and this has never happened before.’ In the

²⁵ Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Origin and Growth of Religion* (NY, NY: Cooper Square Publishers, 1971) and *Primitive Revelation* (St. Louis, MO: J. Herder Book Company, 1939). For a summary of his views see Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 19-35.

²⁶ Bavinck, *Reader*, 139.

²⁷ Calvin, *Institutes*, I.xi.8. quoted by Bavinck, *Reader*, 139.

²⁸ Bavinck, *Reader*, 140.

modern world, peoples spiritual condition is worse than those within the non-Christian religions.²⁹

While this author finds Bavinck's conclusion difficult to dispute on the basis of personal interactions with devoted religious followers, it raises the question of value. Is this saying much? That is, contending religion to compare favorably with atheistic humanism seems to set a benchmark of unimpressive achievement.³⁰ Bavinck, nevertheless, states categorically that given the unchanging human condition general revelation will not render special revelation unnecessary, for "turning towards created idols leaves humans in a state where they desperately need the gospel."³¹ For the "more one explores other religions, the more one becomes aware that there exists a great void between non-Christian religions and Christianity."³²

Conclusions and Working Assumptions: What Shall We Say and Do?

The following conclusions form for this author working assumptions guiding GRIF as we serve those from other religions.

We Must Not Divide the House of Revelation against Itself

General revelation is valid revelation. Since both general and special revelation originate in the Godhead and through the Logos (John 1:3), there must be a more charitable way to appraise the former without losing the complementary unique content and universal necessity afforded by the latter. Ensured reliable by its divine source,

²⁹ Bavinck, *Reader*, 140.

³⁰ See, for example, the relative merits of atheism and Christianity by acknowledged secular humanist, Guenter Lewy, professor emeritus of political science at the Univ. of Massachusetts. While writing a "defense of secular humanism and ethical relativism" the data forced him to repudiate his preconceptions and ultimately change his title: "Fundamentally, our society's affliction is the decay of religious belief...For all its flaws, this civilization has truly blessed the world. Century after century, devout Christians have worked for social justice, cared for the destitute and oppressed, making the West a uniquely humanitarian society." Guenter Lewy, *Why America Needs Religion: Secular Modernity and its Discontents* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1996), 131.

³¹ Bavinck, *Reader*, 140.

³² Bavinck, *Reader*, 141.

general revelation, nevertheless, suffers in its effect by universal sin and calls for corrective manifestation of grace and truth through the gospel. Evangelicals agree that general revelation has its limits in conveying the full picture of God, for some truths the majestic sun and quiet moon cannot teach the family of Adam. Nature's "voice" must be supplemented with human language. Psalm 19 is a classic example of the tandem operation of the physical world and the written Word so that human beings are given lucid insight into God's character and will for them. Scriptures are the primary means of effecting conversion (Heb 4:12-13), speaking directly to the human family at a moral level of reason so that God penetrates the conscience as well as catch the eye.

Scripture functions as set of spectacles and focuses our confused "knowledge" of God derived from the seed of religion and from creation. Without Scripture, we fall into error, for Scripture tells us what the revelation in creation cannot. Scripture truly reveals God. God calls us in the revelation of creation, and Scripture then answers this call by providing a true and adequate revelation of God, a sufficient knowledge of God.³³

Idolatry is a Universal Malady with Numberless Religious Manifestations for which One Solution Exists

Raised in the U.S.A., this pastor grew up thinking of idolatry as something practiced overseas, standard fare among "foreign" countries. Religions, then, became an anomaly determined largely by geography. By contrast, Paul spreads idolatry evenly in Romans 1:18-32 and lists it as a work of the flesh in Galatians 5:20. It is a replication of the actions of the first human pair in response to the serpentine enticements that were carefully crafted to diminish the divine Word (Gen 3:1) as a means of catapulting the human creature to co-equality with the divine Creator (Gen 3:5). Idolatry, then, must not be conceived as regional but as universal, the rule rather than the exception. "The crime humans uniformly commit," writes William Greathouse, "is idolatry – treating created

³³ Plantinga, "God So Love the World," *Religious Plurality*, 116.

things as if they were God.”³⁴ By naming world religions do we miss the larger point if idolatry and religion? Why is it that we do not find Paul pointing an accusing finger to the temples of Apollo or Artemis that cast an influence in the city of Antioch where he served a full year or in other major cities of the Roman Empire? Nor do we hear him raising the question with those he meets on his journeys whether or not they already “have a religious faith.” His anthropological assumption renders the question unnecessary, for “religion,” and the attempt to justify oneself on terms outside of special revelation before what is perceived as the higher power or principle, has no exceptions.

Faith Can Rise No Higher than its Level of Revelation

Religious substitutes for the living God find their corrective potential through an eye opening revelation of the gospel of Christ. “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Rom 1:13). But how are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?” (Rom 10:14). Apart from the gospel of Christ, a religion of human works is inevitable, for similar to the Jews of Paul’s day, “not knowing about God’s righteousness [through grace]” people are left on their own “to establish their own [through human effort]” (Rom 10:3 NASB).

The Preparatory Work of the Holy Spirit in Prevenient Grace is Essential

Let us return now to consider a fourth dynamic in helping us understand to some extent the shaping of religious ideas, the divine motions of prevenient grace. This merits consideration as it relates to the relationship of God’s wider revelation and humanity’s inner-inklings toward God. While the Reformed and Wesleyan theologians differ on the

³⁴ Greathouse, *Romans 1-8*, electronic copy.

recipients of this divine favor,³⁵ both agree on its necessity for salvation readiness. Nazarene theologian Al Truesdale defines this Wesleyan understanding as “the grace that goes before to prepare people to hear and receive the gospel. It is the active presence of the Holy Spirit prior to conversion.”³⁶ Distinguishing it from the impulses of nature, John Wesley vehemently rejected what was called “natural” theology for similar reasons as did Bavinck and Barth. But he extended this grace widely to all human beings upon a Christological basis, flowing first through the pre-incarnate Son (John 1:1-2)³⁷ who enables a corresponding capacity for response. According to Wesley, “it is not nature, but the Son of God that is ‘the true light, which enlighteneth every man that cometh into the world.’ So that we may say to every human creature, ‘He,’ not nature, ‘hath shown thee O man, what is good.’”³⁸ Since everyone receives this light of Christ in some measure, it is believed that: “No person anywhere...’is in a state of mere nature...wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called ‘natural conscience.’ But this is not natural; it is more properly termed ‘preventing [prevenient] grace.’”³⁹

In addition to the influence of the Logos, prevenient grace requires the direct overtures of the Holy Spirit. By virtue of universal human depravity and the bondage of

³⁵ See Appendix 9.

³⁶ Al Truesdale with Keri Mitchell, *With Chords of Love: A Wesleyan Response to Religious Pluralism* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 2006), 124.

³⁷ Dean Flemming, deftly addresses a wide range of the major issues surrounding religious pluralism. On the Logos of John 1 he writes: “When people of other religions come to faith in Christ they do not meet a stranger, for they have already received the illuminating work of prevenient grace. At the same time, the fact that even the incarnate light was not received by ‘his own’ people (John 1:10f), who through the Old Testament revelation had received more illumination than followers of any other religion, reminds us that devotion to religion may lead people to reject the light of Christ. Thus religions are paradoxically both the arenas of divine enlightening and of darkness and rejection. Dean Flemming, “Foundations for Responding to Religious Pluralism,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 131, No 1 (Spring, 1996): 64.

³⁸ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, *Wesley’s Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2002), 188.

³⁹ *Wesley’s Works*, vol. 6, *Wesley’s Sermons*, 509; quoted in Truesdale, *Chords of Love*, 123.

the will (Rom 3:10, 23; Eph 2:2; Titus 3:3, etc.),⁴⁰ this divine grace in pursuit streaming from Christological springs becomes efficacious only through a pneumatological agency. The Spirit who alone raises the dead also prepares the dead to be raised. Prevenient grace becomes the gestation period of the new birth in which the Holy Spirit “restores a person’s moral sense and freedom to respond to the offer of salvation... [and] prompts ‘the first wish to please God. Wesley insisted that no one sins because God’s grace is absent because he or she doesn’t act upon the grace God has given.”⁴¹

Our objective here has been to present the working assumptions that have informed this pastor’s understanding and, in turn, have shaped GRIF’s interaction with religious people. Believing that those with whom we share the gospel, regardless of their country of origin or prior religious affiliation, have already been primed by divine revelation gives us hope.

Conversion is an Act of Divine Mystery that Calls for Humility

The Christian obligation for gospel witness arises out of obedience to Christ rather than advance detection of the ways in which the Holy Spirit will draw from different elements from the range of revelatory stimuli. Given the uncontainable creativity by which the Spirit operates – “the Spirit blows where he wills” – there are aspects that we do not know about religion and that we need not know.⁴² We go out of obedience to Christ and, in going, often discover “the Spirit will creatively use whatever vehicles he finds available, even those arising from general revelation.”⁴³ E Stanley Jones noted this

⁴⁰ For Wesley, wide availability of salvation was possible because of God’s free grace rather than man’s supposed free will: “the grace of God that brings about our salvation...is ‘free in all, and free for all’...[and] that God’s grace depends not at all on human power or merit or good intentions or good desires, but solely upon the initiative of the free God.” *Wesley’s Works*, quoted in Truesdale, *Chords of Love*, 123.

⁴¹ Truesdale, *Chords of Love*, 124.

⁴² Deut 29:29 reminds us of “secret things” known only to God and that the obedience expected of us is limited to that which he reveals in his word.

⁴³ Truesdale, *Chords of Love*, 124.

in India:

He [Jesus] may turn to India as he turned to Judaism and say, 'I came not to destroy but to fulfill.' Just as he gathered up in his own life and person everything that was fine and beautiful in Jewish teaching and past and gave it a new radiant expression, so he may do the same with India. The fact that the words that he used to imply that, for it is a generic term: "I came not to destroy but to fulfill," it is locally applied to the Law and the Prophets, but capable of a wider application to truth found anywhere.⁴⁴

Obligation for the Spread of Gospel Revelation among Religious People Belongs Exclusively to the Church through Christian Witness

The church is obligated, like Paul "to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish" (Rom 1:14), to announce the good news of God's saving grace to all within its orbit of influence. The question, "how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent?" (Rom 10:15), finds its unambiguous answer in Christ's Great Commission (Matt 28:19f). Obedience to such an obligation should never been seen as a chore, for "how beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" (Rom 10:15).

If the human problem, however, is not cognitive in nature, what good does more information serve? Kuber, one of three Bhutanese Hindu priests attending *Making Sense of the Bible*,⁴⁵ expressed this optical challenge: "That is exactly what our Hindu books teach. Truth is perfectly revealed, but our sin puts a layer over our hearts and our eyes. We cannot see it as it is. We distort truth. It is hopeless!" Correctly identifying the cause of humanity's widespread blindness, he was encouraged to return the following week and discover that the situation is no longer a lost cause; a remedy is available.

What is the Gospel?

The gospel is God's downward movement in love towards an alienated humanity. While religion reaches upward from humanity to God in response to his diffusive

⁴⁴ E Stanley Jones, *The Christ of the American Road* (NY: NY, Abingdon Press, 1925), 170.

⁴⁵ The course offered at GRIF introducing the Christian worldview for English students. See Chapter 6.

disclosure in general revelation, it is incapable of bringing salvation. The gospel begins on the side of God and descends to humanity with a disclosure that is definite. The term gospel,⁴⁶ "good news," points to historical events, headline occurrences rather than editorial viewpoints. It augments the immensity of general revelation with specificity and locality, thus supplementing what can be known about God through a diffusive ambiance in the repetitive motions of nature with a singular set of events, happenings that were witnessed closely by thousands and recorded by a carefully selected group of eyewitnesses who, for the most part, lost their lives for the message. The opening paragraph of Paul's letter to the Romans introduces the gospel as its singular crown achievement. In origin, it is "of God" (Rom 1:1) who inspired its anticipated arrival through scriptural writings (Rom 1:2). In content, it concentrates narrowly upon "His Son" (Rom 1:3) whose role as Messiah was certified by human lineage (Rom 1:3) and divine nature authenticated by divine means (Rom 1:4). In purpose, it rescues lost humanity from final wrath and present futility through the "obedience of faith" (Rom 1:5, 16).

Special, unlike general revelation, interfaces with history in a way that permits greater authentication. Kuber, the Hindu priest previously mentioned, returned the following week to hear three specific ways in which gospel revelation supplies religion's missing pieces and, as the work of the living God, animates the human heart in answer to religion's its demoralizing barrenness. Wholly independent of human devising, God introduced in history dual disclosures to answer the dual malady inflicting the divine-human relationship since the fall: divine invisibility to the eye and incompatibility with the heart. What specific elements revealed in the gospel render religion no longer necessary

⁴⁶ "The Greek word *euangelion*, frequently translated "gospel," means "glad tidings," or "good news," and in Pauline usage it refers to the message of God's saving work in Jesus Christ." *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, s.v. "Gospel" (Downers Grove, Ill. : InterVarsity Press, electronic ed., 1993), 369.

and obedience to it universally mandatory?⁴⁷

The Word of God made Plain –
Jesus' Incarnate Life Revealed God Fully and Finally

First, the gospel unveiled the mystery of God's concealment when the "Word" who "was with God in the beginning" and "was God," at a culminating moment in redemptive and recorded history, "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14). God's final revelation was not inscribed on a page but embodied in a Person (John 5:39). Jesus gave us God in perfect focus (John 1:8, 14, 18; 14:9; Col 1:15; 2:9; Heb 1:1-3, etc.). The divine Man appearing in history, in whom the "whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9 ESV), brings the living God into peak precision (1 John 1:1-4) with a clarity so arresting that observer astonishment became the norm (Matt 7:28; 13:54; 22:33; Mark 1:22; 6:2; 11:8; Luke 4:32, etc.).

"He Who has Seen Me has Seen the Father"

The claim that Jesus made privately to his apostles about himself that "he who has seen Me has seen the Father" (John 14:9 NASB) echoing an earlier public statement (John 12:45; cf. 16:28), evokes investigative impulse launching a quest to either authenticate or show him presumptuous. This reaction the NT seems to anticipate by setting his assertion within a larger theological framework.⁴⁸ Since only God can reveal himself without diminutive result, any human claim of co-equality demands matching credentials. In an astonishing collage of support, the Gospel of John presents Jesus in his: (1) preexistence, "in the beginning was the Word" (1:1a, 2), (2) relational proximity within the Godhead, "the Word was with God" (1:1b), (3) shared divinity, "the

⁴⁷ Timothy C. Tennent urges Christians in dialogue to avoid caving in to pluralism: "...we must not succumb to the forces of religious pluralism that seek to bring to the table of dialogue a version of Christianity that has been robbed of its distinctiveness." Tennent, *Roundtable*, 239.

⁴⁸ The Fourth Gospel with its explicitly apologetic aspect answers this question of Jesus' identity in order to achieve a soteriological objective (John 20:31).

Word was God" (1:1c), (4) anthropological influence on a universal scale, "true light which enlightens everyone" (1:4b), (5) eternal effulgence sharing and redeeming human brokenness, "the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory"(1:14, 18), (6) indivisible union with God expressed through undeviating submission, "in the bosom"⁴⁹ of the Father" (1:18 NKJV), "I do not seek my own glory" (8:50) and "what shall I say, save me from this hour?" (12:27-8, 32) and finally (7) authenticating endorsement by a wide range of indubitable witnesses ("the Lamb of God!" [John the Baptist] (1:19, 24-36; 5:33-5), "Come, see a man who told me all the things that I have done" [Samaritan woman] (4:29), "the scriptures" (5:39, 45-7), "the very works that I do" (5:36; 15:24; cf. 2:11, 23; 3:2; 6:14; 20:30-1), "the Father who sent Me" (5:37-8; 8:18), "You are the Holy One of God!" [Peter] (6:69), "the Spirit" (15:26; 16:13-15) and "you will testify of Me" [apostolic band, eyewitnesses "from the beginning"] (15:27). Eyewitnesses following his death and resurrection, "I have seen the Lord!" [Mary Magdalene] (20:18), "My Lord and my God!" [Thomas] (20:28) and "It is the Lord" [Peter] (21:7). When Jesus lays claim, then, to God's ultimate manifestation on earth he is supported by a remarkable range of eyewitnesses over an extended period of time. Audacious as it may sound, it lacks the ring of a swollen ego but possesses the hallmarks of an entitled declaration. If Jesus was indeed a precise match corresponding perfectly to the One he represented, then he has removed for all time the veil hiding the invisible God.

⁴⁹ John uses *κολπος* rather than *μαστος* to convey that the triune Godhead is a model of *koinonia* rather than a Sybil of dichotomous personalities. "To have in one's bosom indicates kindness, secrecy, or intimacy (Gen 16:5; 2 Sam 12:2) ... Christ had the most perfect knowledge of the Father, had the closest intimacy with Him." *Easton's Bible Dictionary*, s. v. "Bosom" (Oak Harbor, WA : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

The Way to God made Possible –
Jesus' Sacrificial Death Provided Access to God for
All Religious Travelers on Alternative Routes

Jesus did not stop at his claim to be the baring of the invisible God but added a corollary assertion of unquestionable universal pertinence. As a solution to condemned humanity, he assumes the role of sole Mediator: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."⁵⁰

"I am the Way"

How striking this is when placed against the jarring announcement of the gospel, a solemn and judicious sentencing that takes the form of divine wrath barring the way to God from ungodly and idolatrous persons (Rom 1:18-3:20). Without a single exception, no human being surmounts this verdict (Rom 3:10), for "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). It is precisely those who have willfully suppressed the truth of God (Rom 1:18), thanklessly disregarded his blessings (Rom 1:21), refashioned his majestic glory into paltry religious constructs (Rom 1:22-23) and in its depravity have perverted God-given sensibilities into wasted baseness. These stand condemned before God. A malady so universal makes the claim of the Galilean more startling. Can one individual emancipate a humanity so shackled by idolatry and unruly passion? Does Jesus' avowal as sole Mediator not come across as presumptuous, deluded by self-importance or ambition? It is well to note the setting for this claim. Jesus' claim was not blurted out while riding a wave of popularity flanked by his fawning entourage but as he entered into abject loneliness and surrounded by a diminishing support group when brought face to face with a bloodthirsty mob. This had less to do with arrogant ambition and more about the courageous acceptance of a steep calling. The narrow way was

⁵⁰ John 14:6. Such a claim, it must be remembered, was as costly as it was bold.

necessitated by the slim number of qualified candidates. Jesus became the solitary way-maker by virtue of his preexistent readiness (Phil 2:5-10; Heb 10:5, 9), sole innocence in temptation (John 1:29; cf. Isa 53:11-12, 1 Cor 5:21 and 1 Pet 1:19 versus Rom 3:23, etc.), lone perseverance in trial⁵¹ and unique identity (Phil 2:5; John 1:1; Heb 1:2-3; 2:9-10; 4:14-16, etc.). That narrow path paradoxically paves the universal access to the Father (John 12:32). What did this entail for Jesus?

The Way through the Cross

The revelation of the gospel presents Christ as the sin-bearing Messiah disclosing the heart of God the Father, “for God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19 NASB). The cross shows God to be faithful in keeping his promises (Luke 18:31-33; 22:20; 24:25-7; 46-7; Acts 2:23; 3:18; 13:27-9, 37-8, etc.), just in forgiving sinners (Rom 3:25), triumphant over death through the resurrection (Acts 2:24, 31-33) and full of merciful love for sinners (Romans 5:8; 8:31-33; Ephesians 2:3-5, Titus 3:3-5, 1 John 3:16; 4:8-10, 2 Corinthians 5:18-21).

Hearts for God Made New— The Holy Spirit Convicts, Awakens, Regenerates, Adopts, Sanctifies and Renews the *Imago Dei*

The third way in which the Gospel answers religion is not through the channel of external revelation but internal transformation. The prophet Jeremiah foretold the day when God would initiate a new covenant of the Spirit that would replace the heart of stone with a heart of flesh (Jer 31:31). The work of Christ for us is made effective by the work of the Spirit accomplished in us. The gospel answers Kuber’s concern of sin’s distortive power that renders humans visually handicapped in “seeing” ultimate truth. It

⁵¹ Cf. Jesus’ resolute prayer, “Now My soul has become troubled; and what shall I say, ‘Father, save me from this hour? But for this purpose I came to this hour’” (John 12:27) w. the disciples’ courageous intentions (Matt 26:35) followed by cowardly performance (Matt 26:56).

does more than remove sin as the cause of death, but imparts the Holy Spirit who regenerates the heart (Titus 3:5-6), clarifies spiritual vision (1 Cor 2:9-13), assures spiritual adoption (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:4-6), brings ongoing renewal to the *imago Dei* in sanctifying grace (2 Cor 3:18; Col 3:10-11), applies Fatherly discipline, instruction and guidance (Heb 12:10; Rom 8:14) and ensures an eternal continuum (Eph 1:13-14).

Does this three-dimensional provision of the gospel – the Word of God made plain through incarnation, the Way to God made possible through his death and human hearts for God made new through the Spirit – alter the place of religion? Now that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men” (Titus 2:11), what shall we say? The advent of the gospel introduces a seismic shift in appraising religion. Let us turn now to the specific nature of that new relationship.

Relationship of the Gospel to Religion

Having defined now both religion in its origin and the gospel in its provisions, what relationship does the gospel have to religion? According to the redemptive view of religion, the gospel of Jesus Christ has initiated four new capabilities with revolutionary implications for the nature of religion. Let me suggest four new relationships between them: existential, providential, antithetical and discontinuous. To each of these the author has affixed a word picture to capture that relationship.

Existential Solution (“Jesus knows my needs”)

How then are we to understand how the gospel links theologically with world religions? At first, this author resonated with “fulfillment theology” showing the “continuity” of the religions with the gospel.⁵² But fulfilling what? After reading the sacred

⁵² Lesslie Newbigin stressed the preparatory relationship in between the world religions and the gospel at the Edinburgh Conference in 1910: “The non-Christian religions can be seen as preparation for the gospel, either as the ‘revelation of deep wants of the human spirit,’ which the gospel satisfies, or as partial insights

texts of classical Hinduism, Theravada Buddhism and Islam a decade ago, the way in which Christ and his gospel fulfilled all of their religious yearnings seemed striking. As previously noted, their hagiography often expressed many human yearnings that are universally experienced. Like the OT Decalogue, the demands of the dharma of Hinduism, the eightfold path of Buddhism and the five pillars of Islam were considered by this pastor to serve as tutors leading to faith in Christ (Gal 3:24; 4:4). This led to hypothesizing the gospel of Christ to fulfill these religions. It was here that Pillay brought needed refinement to that assumption. That is, the gospel does not fulfill this or that religion, but humanity as a whole. It repairs no system by whatever name, but Adam and all his fallen kin – the Hindu, the Buddhist and the Muslim, as well as the “Christian” in name only. One’s affiliation to this or that particular religion becomes incidental and, for many, circumstantially determined by birthplace. Rather than fulfilling specific religions, the gospel answers human yearnings that each religion expresses in unique ways. Christ did not die for a religious it, but for a personal thou. That shift of pronoun produced in this author a corollary change of attitude towards his religious neighbors. First and foremost, while separated by religious affiliation, we and they share the same humanity. Excessively focusing on their religion and its beliefs rather than on them as people imposes distance and leaves outsiders mystified. If, however, that focus is on them as we are in Adam, we discover kinship in the human family. What they need is not new religion but a new Adam. That NT designation for Christ has universal meaning. Adam, without ethnicity, son of God, holds widespread attraction. Stanley J. Grenz

that are corrected and completed by the gospel.” Lesslie B. Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 171.

states it well: "Jesus is the exemplary human being. He is the revelation of who all humans are to be."⁵³ By using the "Second Adam" motif,

the apostle asserts that God's purpose for humankind is eschatological transformation after the pattern of the resurrected Christ. To this end, all humans must meet at the foot of the cross and at the empty tomb. Through his death and resurrection Christ is the 'life-giving spirit' (1 Cor 15:45) who opens the way for the transformation of what was begun in the creation of the First Adam. The touchstone of the universality of the biblical narrative is the Jesus-story that stands at its center. The New Testament writers present the Jesus-narrative as having a universal significance.⁵⁴

For this reason, Lesslie Newbigin correctly "placed the Christian tradition within the history of human beings, not within the history of religions. Hence...The Gospel is 'a secular announcement.'"⁵⁵ Religion as an expression of Adam is what Miriam Adeney gets at in factoring into religion the complexities of the human condition:

Classic Christian teaching on human nature affirms that humans are created in God's image and that humans are sinners. Religions reflect these polarized truths. On the one hand, religions contain patterns of wisdom, beauty, and caring, results of God's gift of creativity in his image. Therefore, I can learn from non-Christian religions...On the other hand, since religions are shaped by sinners, the faiths are stained by sin. They seethe with idolatry and exploitation.⁵⁶

The gospel relieves the aches intrinsic to alienated humanity as voiced through religious hagiography. First, the metaphor "itch and scratch"⁵⁷ conveys an existential relationship between religions and the gospel. The "itch" identifies Adam as everyone outside of Christ and refers to the gnawing disparities created by a sense of divine existence and human accountability that one deduces through general revelation without

⁵³ Stanley J. Grenz, "The Universality of the 'Jesus Story' and the 'Incredulity toward Metanarratives,'" in *No Other gods Before Me?: Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 101.

⁵⁴ Grenz, "Universality," *No Other gods*, 102.

⁵⁵ Grenz, "Universality," *No Other gods*, 102.

⁵⁶ Miriam Adeney, "Rajah Sulayman Was No Water Buffalo," in John G. Stackhouse, *No Other gods*, 68.

⁵⁷ Metaphors are limited by locality and not universally understood. A case in point occurred before an audience in West Africa that found the word picture "itch and scratch" confusing. They preferred "empty to full" to more aptly describe their existential experience in coming to Christ.

a corresponding assurance of acceptance with the Father. Ignorance of these does not evoke bliss as much as it irritates the soul.

Jesus, the “Last Adam” (Rom 5:14) came to save the first human beings from the clutches of his own making. Adam’s woes are our woes, and we hear his tears falling on the sacred pages of each religion. The aspirations expressed in the Hindu Upanishads⁵⁸ are not Hindu, but “my” search in Adam.⁵⁹ Buddha’s cries in the *Tripitaka* for merciful finality that ends the fluctuating cycles of human suffering⁶⁰ is not Buddhist, but “my” gnawing sense of futility. The Muslim’s meticulous devotion to gain merits for the final commendation on the Day of Reckoning by hearing “Well done” and avoiding eternal Fire⁶¹ is not Islamic, but “my” own terror in Adam. The gospel answers these universal

⁵⁸ For example, the *Isa Upanishad*, normally placed prominently as first among the thirteen Upanishads in Hinduism, cries out to see a specific and clear vision of the Reality behind all things: “The face of truth remains hidden behind a circle of gold. Unveil it, O god of light, that I who love the true may see! O life-giving sun, off-spring of the Lord of creation, solitary seer of heaven! Spread thy light and withdraw thy blinding splendor that I may behold thy radiant form...” Juan Mascaro, trans., *The Upanishads* (NY: Penguin Books, 1965), 49.

⁵⁹ Krister Sairsingh from a devout Hindu family initially resisted Christ’s claims as exaggerated and narrow. He began to read a NT that was given to him. The more he read, the clearer he saw the implications of what the removal of sins would mean to him personally. “It was as if he [Christ] were telling me that he could actually come to me and forgive my sins, undo the past, loosen me from the terrors of death, break the bondage of karma, and make me truly free.” Krister Sairsingh, “Christ and Karma: A Hindu’s Quest for the Holy,” in *Finding God at Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians*, ed. Kelly Monroe (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 160-180.

⁶⁰ Siddhattha Gotama, founder of Buddhism, through meditation looked back into his personal history hundreds of years and through thousands of births. After reliving the grief of each painful departure from his beloved kindred, he identifies this plight as the universal human condition: “Again and again they must leave the people they regard as their own, and must go on elsewhere, and that without ever stopping. Surely this world is unprotected and helpless, and like a wheel it turns round and round.” As he continued steadily to recollect the past thus, he came to the definite conviction that this world of *Samsara* is as unsubstantial as the pith of a plantain tree.” Edward Conze, trans., *Buddhist Scriptures* (NY: Penguin, 1959), 49.

⁶¹ Lamin Sanneh from Gambia, Africa, echoed the apostle Paul in expressing a great sense of personal relief resulting from justifying grace, a doctrine that struck him with compelling force: “...I came upon the fantastic teaching of God’s justification by faith. I was stunned by God’s magnanimity, more so because I had no personal cultural pedigree in Christianity...” Sanneh’s comfort resulted from a shift in his reliance, from living under the Qur’anic law to under the grace of the crucified One. He confesses the difficulty of conveying this to those “...who have never known a religion of strict rules and regulations, what it felt like to be crushed beneath the burden of having to obey God’s inscrutable ordinances and how, by contrast, the intervention and interposition of Jesus on the cross felt like a godsend...I felt truly unshackled, released from the crippling incapacity to seek to please God...I came to see that only God can give us the grace to accept his unconditional love for us, since culture, experience, and habit will instill in us a cultivated indifference to revealed truth—precisely where Islam rubs in the salt with regard to human incompetence before God and,

human needs which religions culturally particularize. Every line of this ancient Sumerian prayer echoes the “itch” of the Adamic soul:

A Prayer to Every God

May the fury of my lord's heart be quieted toward me.
May the god who is not known be quieted toward me;
May the goddess who is not known be quieted toward me.
In my ignorance I have set foot on that prohibited of my goddess.
O Lord, my transgressions are many; great are my sins.
...O god whom I know or do not know,
(my) transgressions are many; great are (my) sins;
...The sin which I have done, indeed I do not know.
The forbidden thing which I have eaten, indeed I do not know;
The prohibited (place) on which I have set foot, indeed I do not know.
O my god, merciful one, I address to you the prayer,
“Ever incline to me”;
I kiss the feet of my goddess; I crawl before you...
Man is dumb; he knows nothing;
Mankind, everyone that exists, -- what does he know?
Whether he is committing sin or doing good, he does not even know.
Remove my transgressions;...
May your heart, like the heart of a real mother, be quieted toward me;
Like a real mother (and) a real father may it be quieted toward me.⁶²

This suppliant faces three “insurmountable problems” according to Daniel Block:

First, he does not know which god he has offended; second, he does not know what the offense is; third, he does not know what it will take to satisfy the god/gods.⁶³

Hardly surface scratches, these deep sores, haunting questions, and chronic longings find their medicine in the gospel. Healing balm for Adam's suffering is found “in Christ.” From the biblical perspective, birthplace notwithstanding, as children of Adam, all are rowing in the same sinking boat (Rom 3:10; 23).

by implication, before those who claim to speak for God.” Lamin Sanneh, “Jesus, More than a Prophet,” in Monroe, *Finding God at Harvard*, 160-180.

⁶² Adapted by Daniel I. Block from J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, 3d ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 391-92; quoted in David W. Baker (ed.), *Biblical Faith and Other Religions: An Evangelical Assessment* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2004), 76.

⁶³ Block, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, 78.

Prevenient Grace ("God already knew you.")

The gospel introduces religious people their Benefactor who previously to the advent of Christ had already extended to them his providential care. This providential relationship is conveyed through the image of "training wheels and bicycle." Christianity never claims to possess a monopoly on divine revelation and to presume such a premise contradicts the preaching of Paul and undermines these rays of religious light as preliminary means of divine grace (Acts 14:16-17). They provide individuals and civilizations with a measure of social order and personal meaning through the lights generated through general revelation of conscience and creation. In the view of this author, Barth goes too far in dismissing religions.⁶⁴ Perhaps it is better to see them as divine overtures of prevenient grace, pointing in partial form to what awaits them fully in Christ's revelation.

Once the gospel is received, however, many former values, beliefs, attitudes and practices which may, like training wheels, be discarded as unnecessary with impunity. While that which is good and beautiful from one's past culture remain, other practices or beliefs will no longer align with the new values of Jesus Christ. "The truth shall set you free" said Jesus, and by his word his followers can distinguish wheat from chaff. Much good has come from the Creator's hand through general revelation and must not be despised.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Tennent, *Religious Roundtable*, 18. For a helpful summary comparing how theologians have understood the relationship between world religions and Christianity, see his chapter, "Can Sola Fide Be Understood Apart from the Specific, Historic Revelation of Christ? A Study of A. G. Hogg's Distinction between Faith and Faiths," 231-38. Hogg, who "emphasized personal encounter between an individual and God" over doctrinal systems which "only petrify God into dead dogma, rather than liberating someone into a living relationship with God," stands in contrast to both the popular "fulfillment theology" of J. N. Farquhar in his emphasis of the continuity between other religions and Christianity" and with Hendrick Kraemer who "recognized no revelation of God in the world apart from that which has been self-disclosed in the Scriptures." Tennent, *Roundtable*, 234.

⁶⁵ A church's healthy respect for general revelation's contributions to any given society will guard it against tendencies to confuse religious devotion from cultural practices of converts to Christ from those societies.

Contrasting Attraction (“See Christ and ...”)

The gospel contextualizes Christian witness by traversing familiar paths. Third, a “diamond and foil” image sets a sparkling jewel against a background of black velvet as a contrasting relationship between Christ and his alternatives. A NT example is the book of Hebrews in which Christ is set against the prized features of the old Jewish covenant, making prominent the many dimensions of his radiance (Heb 1:1-2). In similar fashion, this can be tactfully done by placing Christ against the other religious figures or certain features of the religions they offer. A word of caution is in order. By this, the contrasts between Christ and XYZ god or belief must remain unstated by the evangelist. Mocking or demeaning Krishna, Buddha or Muhammad is ill-advised as well as unnecessary. Instead, it is best to allow our friends to draw the contrasts as Christ is lifted up in his grace, compassion and purity. The gospel is strong enough to stand on his own.⁶⁶

Divine Imperative (“Turn from idols to serve the living God”)

The gospel issues a universal call for repentance in light of God’s full disclosure and atoning provision in Christ and future judgment. Do these provisions of the gospel – the Word of God made plain, the Way to God made possible and, by the Spirit, a heart for God made new – alter the place of religion? Addressing the Athenians, Paul concludes, “The times of ignorance God overlooked [idolatrous religion], but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness” (Acts 17:30-1 ESV). The gospel introduces nothing less than a seismic shift in appraising religion as signaled by the words of God, “but now” (Acts 17:30 ESV; cf. 14:16; Rom 3:25; 1 Pet 4:3). The final image to capture the

⁶⁶ David Seaman commendably describes principled evangelistic practices in a wide range of religious encounters in an Indian context. David Seaman, *Tell it Well* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1979).

relationship of religions to the gospel is “ritual and family reunion” and points to their discontinuous relationship that calls for repentance. If God simply exists as a pantheistic force in the universe to which all share a part, then reconciliation becomes a term of irrelevance or, perhaps, “childishness” as said to this pastor by a Buddhist teacher. Reestablishing relationship is futile if no friendship had existed. On the other hand, if God is a personal Creator of heaven and earth and Redeemer for sinful humanity, where does that leave religious ritual? Repairing interpersonal relationships that have been violated requires more than religious ritual, however flawlessly performed.⁶⁷ If a husband’s affair is discovered by his wife, no amount of roses or even a diamond ring can remove the barrier that he has imposed. Sin, at its heart, is more than broken law but broken love among significant others leaving a trail of cover-up, deception, fear, shame and anger. This interpersonal rift at the heart of sin has been solved in the gospel with an interpersonal incarnation and redemption and, thereby, offers reconciliation. This in effect reduces religious ritual to an exercise of presumed self-improvement, regardless how fervently it might be expressed. In estranged relationships it is the offended party who holds the power to grant forgiveness or to withhold it from the offender. God’s reconciling act at the heart of the gospel (2 Cor 5:19) was more than a verbal declaration made in conciliatory tones but a vivid demonstration that can truly put one’s past offenses to rest (2 Cor 5:21). My Muslim friend Aslan strains hard to please Allah in an effort to win his favor and escape Hell’s fire. Yet through the gospel he too is invited back into proper relationship with his maker. The call to repentance for Aslan will involve a turning away from his own works of sufficiency and humbly receive the Gift by faith.

⁶⁷ Even in the OT context, ritual performance is secondary to obedience as seen in 1 Sam 15:22: “And Samuel said [to Saul], “Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obedience to the voice of the Lord? Surely, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.”

Does the coming of Christ change the way we look at religion? With the Gospel a seismic shift occurs in the level of divine tolerance of religion and idolatry. Specifically, what changes is not God's attitude towards idolatry, for that is expressed throughout the OT. Now the difference is what can be justly demanded of the idolater in light of his fuller revelation in Christ. Prior to the advent of Christ it had been permission granted in a way that revealed God's restraining grace. Afterwards God's revealing grace, however, idolatrous religion becomes permission denied. In the preaching of Paul, such past restraint and present demand is one of the aspects marking God's judgment as "righteous" (Acts 17:25). For faith is able to rise to the level of revelation. In this sense, Barth correctly condemned religion as unbelief.

Although world religions and the Christian gospel both emerge from divine revelation -- general and special -- universal sinfulness derails religions in whatever form as reliable paths to God. Through the grace of God, Christ cut a new path. The one who "lights everyone who comes into the world" (John 1:2), appeared solely as the dying and rising Messiah, "the way, the truth and the life." Ushering in the present era in which we find ourselves, this period of time is indubitably splendid in its overflowing favor and wide expanse, nevertheless, is limited in duration (2 Cor 5:13-6:2). It is thus incumbent upon the church as God's ambassadors in this present age to labor toward the divine purpose of calling "obedience of faith in the nations" (Rom 1:5). Those "nations," often affixed to alternate crisscrossing paths of religious devotion, can now intersect with the superhighway of saving grace. What kind of church composition offers these families of the world the most inviting convergence where those loaded down with abounding sin can meet the One who offers them his super-abounding grace (Rom 5:20-21)?

CHAPTER 4

THE MULTIETHNIC CHURCH IN PLURALIST SOCIETIES REPRESENTS THE ECCLESIAL MODEL OF MISSIONAL ADVANTAGE

The church is never an end in itself.

–Helmut Thielecke

Thousands of churches carry on 'business as usual' without ever asking the simple question, 'Why has God placed us as a community, at this time, in this neighborhood, in this city, in this country, in this world?

–Samuel Escobar

Having surveyed the formation of the MEC through the Word of God in special revelation in Chapter 2 and located the origin of religion outside of the scriptural canon largely through the cosmic works of God in general revelation and human creation in Chapter 3, our attention now leads logically back to our central issue of how congregations can effectively reach out to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who have immigrated into their communities. It raises this missional question, however, from the perspective of ecclesial demographics and argues that the MEC is the congregational composition of missional advantage over those of ethnic similarity. That is, we contend that the MEC provides the best on-ramp merging the alternate routes of world religions to Christ who is the Way.

As GRIF began this journey after ninety-two years as a homogenously composed congregation, we had no idea of the ramifications for mission that becoming ethnically inclusive would have. All we knew then was that the surrounding neighborhood had changed and that God had called us to leave our own "people group" to reach out to our multicultural and global neighbors. We did so with the belief that we would more accurately reflect the nature of the kingdom. It did not dawn on most of us how much it would become a missional strategy in a world that is dogged by racial animosities and inter-ethnic conflict. The further we advanced in this venture the more we began to

discover some key advantages for mission that had not previously been realized in our Anglo composition. Given the challenges posed by mixing dissimilar cultures, one may ask if it has been worth the effort. While Chapter 6 addresses this in more narrative form, the present section brings us to the author's third assertion that in cultures of ethnic diversity, the MEC is better able to advance the *missio Dei* than its homogenous counterparts. What are those advantages? Amid the peaks and valleys of these first ten years, specific benefits have risen to the surface.

Better Credibility – By Validating What It Professes

The MEC Answers the Prayer of Jesus

The MEC answers the prayer of Jesus that the love of his people for one another would be conspicuous to the world as a compelling badge authenticating his identity and mission. Christians who confess the Nicene Creed learn the four historic marks of the Christian church as “one holy Catholic and Apostolic.”¹ Its first hallmark echoes the prayer of Jesus in John 17:21 that “they may all be one.” A serious weakness of evangelical Christianity is the way in which it assigns the church's oneness to an “invisible” or “spiritual” unity in God's mind.² Jesus was praying, however, for believers in union with God would emerge as one and seize the attention of outsiders (v 21b).

How does the unity of the Church affect its evangelistic mission in the world? Before Billy Graham agreed to hold a crusade in New York City about twenty years ago, he insisted that black, white and other ethnic congregations would work together and seat their pastors on the platform. His rationale was straightforward: “Unless we can

¹ Henry Bettenson, ed., and Chris Maunder, ed. 3d ed., *Documents of the Christian Church* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1999, 3rd Ed.), 29.

² Robert E. Webber, *Common Roots: A Call to Evangelical Maturity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1978), 55.

integrate the church we can't talk to the world." Jesus knew that a church that is unified is a Church that is convincing and a church that is divided distorts the gospel and is, thereby, dubious. The ramifications for the *missio Dei* was understood by Francis Schaeffer: "Bitter division gives the world the right to disbelieve the Gospel." "That," declared Chuck Colson, "is our scandal."³ How credible is a message of costly reconciliation when heard against a backdrop of comfortable segregation? Can congregations of ethnic similarity prophetically call their diverse neighborhoods that are engaged in verbal or physical assault to racial justice without sounding like the Pillsbury Dough Boy calling the country to the Atkins Diet? Jesus knew that concrete illustrations of extraordinary love among his church would do far more to reverse skeptical appraisals toward his mission than creedal confessions of catholicity (as vital as those are).

Better Congruence – By Aligning Identity with the *Missio Dei*

The MEC is a Natural Platform for Cross-cultural Witness.

The MEC as God's grace-formed multiethnic people integrates identity, mission and strategic function. We entered this venture well aware that ecclesiology is a derivative of soteriology, for people are baptized into the church upon their confession of faith. What we now are learning is how ecclesiology is more than the product of salvation; it becomes a means to it. Peter describes the church in a way that explicitly fuses her ecclesiological identity, "you are," with mission, "that you may."

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Pet 2:9-10 ESV)

³ Francis Schaeffer, *Mark of the Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976); quoted by Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, *The Faith Given Once, for All*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 143.

These “titles of privilege” that once applied to Israel now belong to the church.⁴ Out of multiple *ethnoi*, God forms a single *ethnos hagian*, “holy nation,” to be his living Temple. The purpose of this new dwelling is “that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9b). Our call and mission is to spread the joyful news of God’s salvation. We are reminded that “Israel was not chosen that the other nations might be consigned to perdition, but that through Israel’s election they might all enjoy God’s blessing...”⁵ Evangelism is doxology voiced to non-believers. “We declare before the nations the works and the name of the Lord. Our praises to God bear witness to the world. The heart of evangelism is doxological.”⁶

Better Accessibility -- By Placing the Gospel within Reach

The MEC has an advantage for reaching out to our Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim neighbors who have migrated in our cities by placing the gospel within reach of people living on the margins. Minimally, the church must remove roadblocks that hinder people from hearing the gospel. Jesus sent scorching words to leaders in the kingdom who “lock people out of the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 23:13). Like John the Baptist, the church is called to clear the way to God. But removing obstacles is only a first step. Like Jesus, it must cut new paths, seek out and embrace lost people. The position of this chapter is that the multiethnic congregation is the most clearly marked on-ramp to the superhighway to give access to the maximum number of people. The more subgroups there are in church, the more inroads can open up into a community.⁷

⁴ Edward Gordon Selwyn, *The First Epistle of St. Peter* (NY: MacMillan Publishing, 1969), 164.

⁵ John Bright, *Kingdom of God* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1953), 61.

⁶ John Bright, *Kingdom of God*, 96.

⁷ See also Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., *The Church and Cultures: New Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 104-5.

The MEC Illustrates in Life before Illuminating with Words

Inclusion starts with incarnation because without going out there cannot be bringing in. Building a MEC without first crossing cultural borders is an elusive dream. As Jesus so often illustrated in life before illuminating in truth, so the gathering together of multiple ethnicities in worship and friendships itself becomes a vivid backdrop to the proclamation of the gospel of peace. Outsiders can see it before they hear about it. Following Jesus, through the Spirit, the church moves out. While the numbers dramatically fluctuate, on any given Sunday ten to twenty Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim people may attend GRIF services. Most come because of the love, care and friendship that have been shown them during the week. Some who have crossed the line of faith testify that one reason they considered Christ was when they came and saw, much to their surprise, a congregation that was ethnically integrated. Irregularities such as these lent credibility to the gospel message and caused them to personally consider it for themselves.

The MEC Piques Curiosity as a Corrective Quirk to Parallel Cultures

The MEC presents communities that are culture-locked with an anomaly that captures interest, creates curiosity and stimulates questions. Life's oddities cause heads to turn and create curiosity. To be part of this "holy nation" means metaphorically that we allow God to write his own signature on the pages of our church's life. In Matthew 5:48 what distinguishes that signature is not the clothes worn and the foods liked but the people loved. The MEC is just that, a corrective quirk in segregated society. Those who we invite to sit at our table fellowship will speak volumes. Cross-cultural love becomes a hallmark of the children of the Father and seizes the attention of fascinated onlookers.

The MEC Multiplies Doorways as a Home Away from Home

The MEC provides people who migrate into the U.S.A. with an inviting place to belong, a “home” away from home. It multiplies doorways into the church through compassion, hospitality and friendship. In the world of refugees and ethnic minorities, the power of authentic cross-cultural friendship is enormous. We are learning that evangelism runs best on the tracks of compassion and friendship. Recognizing people as people, made in the *imago Dei*, they cease being categorized as target groups and are valued simply for who they are. While addressing a large group of refugees who had resettled in the Grand Rapids area, this pastor made a simple remark that elicited an unexpected enthusiastic response: “You are refugees no more! You are our friends!” Former designations as “immigrant” and “refugee,” on the one hand, or “Hindu,” “Buddhist” or “Muslim,” on the other, increasingly recede signaling that they have moved from our project to our friend. Irving Hexham says it well. In his education in England by both Buddhist and Muslim instructors and with other students from different faiths, he observed that “...from the experience of friendship with people of other faiths I conclude that it is essential to separate religious systems from the individual. We may disagree about doctrine, but we can recognize our common humanity. Genuine friendship and respect cut across religious commitments.”⁸

Love dictates where we go. Displaced people suffer acute loneliness and alienation.⁹ They politely smile when with us but, as some have privately confided, many soak their pillows with tears. They need friendship. “The strong must bear the failings of the weak” (Rom 15:1-2). Both Testaments put God’s people in the lives of the

⁸ Irving Hexham, “Evangelical Illusions,” in *No Other Gods Before Me? Evangelicals and the Challenge of World Religions*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 158.

⁹ For a portrayal of the experiences, feelings and traumas encountered by displaced persons and ways to assist them, see James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis, MINN: Fortress Press, 2001), 84-111.

marginalized, the foreigner. By practicing warm hospitality toward strangers (Rom 12: 9; Heb 13:3; 1 Pet 4:10f), we find many affinities with them which makes enfolded them into the congregation a natural occurrence.

The MEC Presents Christianity's True Colors

The MEC minimizes perceptions of Christianity's foreignness among people from other faiths and outside the U.S.A. Its demographic composition offers empirical evidence against stereotypes that equate Christianity with "white man's religion," thus presenting a truer image. Vera, a Brazilian woman upon her first Sunday said "It feels like home!" Rao's initial apprehension lifted when he saw people of all hues. Bi-racial couples have found a more comfortable place to belong. The MEC undermines the stereotype that Christianity is a religion primarily for whites. With its wide variation of customs, colors, languages and cultures, foreigners are made to feel more "at home" and enabled to overcome that significant color barrier to faith. The notion that the gospel is exclusively or mainly for Westerners is upended by examples to the contrary. Different cultures and ethnicities united in life and worship casts a far more accurate depiction of the message of the gospel of peace. It also underscores that becoming a Christ-follower is not synonymous with becoming white.

Better Society – By Bridging the Racial Divide

Belonging to an integrated church has a better chance to help dominant cultures become more aware of challenges facing minorities. It is one thing to read about those challenges in a newspaper, but another to hear about it from a known co-worshiper from that ethnic group. In an all Anglo church, racial injustices too easily can become a distant problem, out of sight, out of mind. By giving prominence to God's reconciling power

through the enmity-destroying blood of Christ, it establishes a strong basis and starting point for forging friendship among those of another culture or even former enemies.

The MEC Practices Peacemaking

The MEC affords the practice of peacemaking because of its broad mixture of cultures and ethnicities. It applies the medicine of reconciliation to historic and present wounds and mitigates cross-cultural tensions as needed. The MEC faces many of the same issues involved with mixing racial groups as one finds in the outside world. But it has resources that are true solutions as a result of the gospel of reconciliation. In the world it takes great effort to find common ground among diverse groups, where the church is built on realities that draw people together. Those resources are identified in Part 1 of this chapter. As it does so, it better communicates the character of the God of peace.¹⁰ The MEC can play a strategic role in a world of ethnic conflict. We emphasize “can” because true reconciliation requires active engagement and a commitment to a process. “Whether we take small steps or large leaps,” according to DeYoung, “reconciliation is a process. We can state the problems with precision, proclaim the biblical mandate with eloquence, and commit ourselves to the principles, but unless we actually engage in a process, we will never experience reconciliation.”¹¹ What does that process entail? Curtiss DeYoung believes it to include critical steps.¹²

The MEC Attracts Vulnerable Minorities

The MEC attracts victimized persons who have been deprived of basic human

¹⁰ I am indebted to Phil Starr, Pastor of Student Ministries at GRIF, for this insight, September 9, 2010.

¹¹ Curtiss Paul DeYoung, *Reconciliation: Our Greatest Challenge – Our Only Hope* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1977), 88.

¹² These steps include “taking responsibility, seeking forgiveness, repairing the wrong, healing the soul, and creating a new way of relating....Reconciliation will rarely be achieved unless we strive to go through these steps in the process.” DeYoung, *Reconciliation*, 88.

rights. It becomes a refreshing oasis in a land that is parched dry and cracked by nationalism, xenophobia and bigotry. Foreigners who are wearied by language learning and culture adjustment as well as indigenous minorities who are dogged by historic racism can each find refuge, belonging and service in the household of God. Acts of compassion adorn the gospel of Christ. Peter Kuzmic, theologian from the Balkans, describes the toll that events in the final decade of the twentieth century took on the people of his country: "...We in the Balkans have lived on a war-driven roller coaster after the communist ideology was replaced by the conflicting nationalistic ideologies."¹³ The interethnic conflicts around the globe, he notes, have caused the number of refugees to spike. Drawing from figures supplied by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, he notes the alarming four year period between 1991 and 1995 in which their number escalated from 17 million to 27 million worldwide.¹⁴ Agape, a relief agency which he and others founded after the Kosovo crisis, represents how compassion integrates with evangelism: "It would be a two-hands ministry: with one hand we would give daily bread because people were physically hungry; with the other hand we would offer the eternal bread because they were spiritually hungry."¹⁵ Some evangelical churches focus exclusively on strong biblical teaching and evangelism. Kuzmic calls us to strike a balance that better reflects the mission of Jesus.

All of Christian life and mission is a two-way street with constant traffic between the text and the context, between God's holy word and God's alienated world. If we ignore the world, we betray the word because the word sends us into the world. If we ignore the word, like some of our liberal friends, we will have nothing to bring to the world.¹⁶

¹³ Peter Kuzmic, "Integral Mission is a World of Violence," Tim Chester (ed.), *Justice, Mercy and Humility: Integral Mission and the Poor* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2002), 150.

¹⁴ Kuzmic, *Integral Mission*, 150.

¹⁵ Kuzmic, *Integral Mission*, 156.

¹⁶ Kuzmic, *Integral Mission*, 156.

A Christian worldview is itself a life-giving means of compassion, offering the nations a reason to turn from their chronic despair through finding hope in the Messiah in a way that distinguishes itself among the religions of the world. Sri Lankan missiologist, Benjamin Fernando, writes:

...Social problems assume greater importance in Christianity than in Buddhism or Hinduism. The theory of Karma and rebirth gives a fairly reasonable explanation for social inequalities of this life which on the one hand are consequences of the previous life and on the other hand can be compensated for in the next life. But to a Christian there is only one earthly life and so social problems have to be dealt with now or never.”¹⁷

Social reformer Vishal Mangalwadi of India describes the humanizing influences of the Christian worldview at work in Hindu culture, especially in mitigating the debilitating effects of the caste system, through leaders as William Carey.¹⁸

The MEC Levels the Playing Field over Time

The MEC levels the playing field between the haves and have-nots in congregational life by a continual renewal of the mind. It dignifies contributions made by the poor and replaces simplistic paradigms of haves and have-nots with a kingdom standard that gauges the true worth of the contributions made by its members. Christ has brought people into our fellowship who experience Christ at poverty level. Many did not grow up in poverty but came to experience it after a change in political leadership in their mother country. Most became refugees after losing their homes, clothing, savings and livelihood. In what way do they contribute to a community of relative affluence? “Relative” is used because middle-class Americans typically see themselves as one

¹⁷ Benjamin Fernando, “The Evangelical and Social Upheaval (part 2),” in *Christ Seeks Asia*, ed. W. S. Mooneyham (Rock House, 1969), 118-19; quoted in Samuel Escobar, *The New Global Mission: The Gospel from Everywhere to Everyone* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 147.

¹⁸ Vishal Mangalwadi, *The Quest for Freedom & Dignity: Caste, Conversion & Cultural Revolution*, (Colorado Springs, COL: GLS Publishing, South Asian Resources, 2001), 145-154. Ram Raj, I. R. S., President of the Lord Buddha Club, attests to positive effects of Christian efforts in The Foreword, xv – xx.

check away from bankruptcy when, in fact, many have garages, basements and rental units stuffed with things.

The MEC can be a community of complementary inequality. Refugees and the poor possess far greater wealth than meets the eye. In one sense, inequalities among individual believers are community assets in a fellowship of interdependence. For “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Cor 12:18). Dichotomies of rich and poor, identifying contributors and recipients is not always clean-cut. Clearly, who needs whom underscores a relationship of interdependence in the body of Christ in which host and guest need one another in a relationship of reciprocity. To what effect? “...by applying biblical principles of reciprocity, solidarity and mutuality, poor Christians will be empowered to become agents of their own liberation and not passive recipients of handouts.”¹⁹

Affluent Christians in the church at Laodicea are severely disciplined for telling themselves, “I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing” and is reminded that “you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked” (Rev 3:17). They are admonished to “buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich” (Rev 3:18). That “gold” for us “wealthier” Christians comes mainly through the flood of refugees. Though penniless, they made GRIF wealthier than before their arrival. The MEC draws enormous non-monetary capital calculated in quantities of time, family, skills, values, perspective, wisdom that feed into and edify the whole congregation. Every culture brings with it treasures that enriches the church.

¹⁹Mangalwadi, *Quest for Freedom*, 148.

Better Reflection – By Wearing Christ’s Peacemaking Garments

The MEC Washes the Face of Jesus in the World

The MEC “washes the face of Jesus”²⁰ in society by caring its cross, serving others, sharing the Good News and discovering power beyond itself in the Holy Spirit. A church that measures itself only against itself will struggle becoming more than itself. By contrast, the church that gauges her value against “the new self” in Christ will be continually “renewed in knowledge according to the image of its Creator” (Col 3:10). It will undergo transformation by riveting its gaze upon its preeminent Pattern for its corporate life, the person and work of Jesus Christ. The temporary discomfort that cross-cultural ministry entails, however, produces a desirable end, a church that adopts the life of its Lord. In that renewal there is true change. But what will this require? A homogenous congregation may find itself convinced that Rene Padilla is correct: “With the coming of Jesus Christ all barriers that divide humankind have been broken down and a new humanity is now taking shape in and through the church.”²¹ Convinced of that, it believes it should begin to reach across ethnic borders, initiate bridge-building measures and enfold the Other into their membership as a reflection of the inclusive love of God. It likely will pause to consider the costs. The MEC, indeed, involves an investment of time and energy. It may require biblical and theological reflection, letting go of some personal convenience, financial and material resources and more. For us, changing to become inclusive did not simply happen but has involved patient and intentional effort. Escobar reminds us that the MEC “is a community which embodies that creative tension, with all the contradictions and agonies this involves.”

²⁰ Peter Kuzmic, lecture, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, D.Min. Residency 1, January 2007. This poignant phrase describes the action of the church serving in a world of brokenness to show as well as to declare the gospel.

²¹ Rene Padilla, *Mission between the Times: Essays in the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 1985), 168.

The paradox, however, is how the church's sacrifice on behalf of marginalized people, in this case the displaced refugee, ushers it into the fellowship of Christ's sufferings out of which comes a fullness of his resurrection joy. When driven to our knees we find the posture from which we arise to perform at our best. GRIF's Administrator, Eva, when asked how the MEC has impacted her, answered "I have a greater heart for matters of injustice." Life-change happens when we reach out with the compassion of Christ.

It would be difficult to find a passage in the New Testament depicting what it means to be a vibrant MEC community more than Colossians 3:11-15:

Here there is no Gentile or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.

Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.²² Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.

And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful (Col 3:11-15 TNIV).

The quality of community described here reflects the values of the New Humanity. For this reason, the MEC demands the adoption of a counter-cultural ethos through the dying and rising of its members. The preceding verses show the individual and corporate action of the community: "...seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices, and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator" (Col 3:9-10 NIV).

²² These are not to be understood in a moralistic sense. Peter O'Brien reminds us that these persons who "clothe themselves with the graces of Christ... are addressed as 'God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved'... They have already been raised with Christ (Col 3:1, 3), and have put on the new man (v 10). The graces produced in their lives are the fruit of God's Spirit (Gal 5:22-23; cf. Eph 5:8-11; Jas 3:13-18; Matt 7:16-20). Barker, Glenn W., David A. Hubbard and Ralph P. Martin, eds., *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 44, *Colossians, Philemon*, by Peter T. O'Brien (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982), 180.

The church must deliver a fatal blow to the “Old Man” (Adam), stripping away his vices of exaggerated self-importance and divisive activity and wrap itself with the “New Man” and the virtues of Christ are what build cohesive community among people of varied cultures (Col 3:10-12). The point is that this new wardrobe is no longer alien to us, but expresses who, as God’s beloved children in Christ, we truly are!

Conclusion

The multiracial congregation is not only indelibly fixed on that long revelatory highway as argued in Chapter 2, but it must remain there to carry forward the purposes of God of forming an eschatological international community to the glory of his grace. As an ecclesial construct it is most in-step with God’s original purposes and final destiny. Chapters 3 and 4 identify the beneficiaries of the MEC. Certainly, the nations stand to gain as recipients of the gospel by which to enter the family of God. Treading the path of Christ benefits the church by not sidetracking itself with a host of secondary concerns or routines with faded meaning. Society at large improves with every new cross-cultural friendship that immunizes itself against unchecked stereotyping. Last but not least, all heaven rejoices as individuals from Adam’s sprawling family come to repentance. God reaps enormous gains by hearing praises to his name in ways befitting the built-in diversity of his creation. Christ, by whose blood the wall of hostility fell, surely finds enormous pleasure upon every occasion that his peace-takers become peace-makers in his name. In short, everyone wins.

CHAPTER 5

LITERATURE REVIEW

An influx of immigrants into the United States over the last quarter century combined with urgent racial issues among historic ethnic minorities has precipitated a spate of literary works by sociologists, theologians and pastors. This chapter reviews the published works of a select number of these, especially proponents of ethnically integrated congregations. First, we will look at theological themes that are considered to be germane in forming and sustaining multiethnic congregations (MEC). Second, we will examine what has become known as the “homogenous unit principle” (HUP) that was first articulated by the Church Growth Movement (CGM) fathered by Donald McGavran. As the reigning ecclesiastical construct in modern American evangelicalism in which congregations are typically composed of those from similar cultural ethnicity, its premises must be clearly understood and evaluated. Third, we will briefly explore various congregational models for multiethnic congregations.

Authors and Books Reviewed

Arranged by the date of their publications, the authors below either champion multiethnic congregations or speak to issues directly impacting them.¹ Donald McGavran in two classic works, *The Bridges of God*² and *Understanding Church Growth*,³ faced

¹ To avoid reading the experiences of other transitioning congregations into GRIF's, the author has excluded from this review their published accounts. Despite the value to GRIF's efforts they would likely bring, in the interest of objectivity the author has chosen to delay their study until completing the present work. It is hoped that wider benefits will override immediate interests, thus enhancing the value of later comparisons. E.g., Mark Deymaz, *Building a Healthy Multiethnic Church: Mandate, Commitments, and Practices of a Diverse Congregation* (San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2007).

² Donald A. McGavran, *The Bridges of God* (NY: Friendship Press, 1955).

³ Donald A. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 3rd edition 1990, 1970).

with an era of membership decline endeavored to move the church beyond its plateau by noting that people liked to come to Christ without crossing cultural fences. He considered the proclamation of the gospel and planting homogenous churches to be the primary means of fulfilling the great commission. Every author cited in this Literature Review has made reference to his homogenous unit principle (HUP), with assessments almost unanimously negative. We will examine his works in part two of this chapter.

Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein in *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Strife*⁴ apply eight MEC principles and innumerable first-hand experiences from Scripture. This lively work by black and white co-pastors presents the rigors and rewards of a multicultural church. It aims to diminish racial strife between blacks and whites in America through the gospel of reconciliation. Part one is biographical, tracing the separate experiences of these pastors into the ugly hypocrisy of racist society and how their journeys merged. Their collaborative stories show the degree to which it takes more than a noble vision to sustain a multiethnic church and calls for cross-cultural interactions that are frequent and mutually meaningful. Part two presents concrete ways to clothe grand vision with relational flesh, biblical wisdom and life experience. Although speaking from a bi-racial context, their principles carry over into an international church and provide a rare educational experience that moves beyond lofty platitudes to daily practice. Significantly, their work demonstrates that just because the road of racial reconciliation is rocky does not mean that it is the wrong road.

Manuel Ortiz, a child of Puerto Rican immigrants who grew up in Manhattan, started four Hispanic churches in Chicago and planted a multiethnic church in Philadelphia. His comparisons between ethnic and multiethnic congregations are

⁴ Glen Kehrein and Raleigh Washington, *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Strife* (Moody Press, 1993).

enriched by his wide experience. In *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church*,⁵ he presents a biblically-based vision for multicultural local church ministry that is based upon solid exegesis of key texts, he offers principles that take shape in two basic “types” (the multi-congregational and multiethnic church) and four “models” of cross-cultural congregations active today.

Thomas G. Nees, *The Changing Face of the Church: From American to Global*.⁶ I include this author because of his subject, his history and the clarity of his assessment of the homogenous unit principle. While pastoring an Anglo church in Washington DC in the mid 1970's he launched the Community of Hope, bringing a redemptive presence in the projects of our nation's capital. Later as denominational director of Multicultural Ministries in the Church of the Nazarene (CN) to which I belong, Nees calls his church to not abandon the cities for suburban homogenous comfort. He identifies critical issues that church leaders must address, namely, cross-cultural ministry skills, organizational changes for an inclusive church, neighborhood-based congregations and a drastic shift from viewing the church in the U.S.A. from a “sending” church to local mission outposts.

Stephen A. Rhodes, in *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World*,⁷ writes as a MEC pastor in one of America's most diverse communities in Washington, D.C. He articulates the theological basis to support the idea that the multiethnic church has been God's intention all along. Divided into three sections, Trinitarian ecclesiology, practical ministry and an eschatology of hope, he highlights twelve events in the biblical metanarrative from Genesis to Revelation. More than a theological treatise, he eloquently fuses pertinent biblical texts with sociological data and

⁵ Manuel Ortiz, *One New People: Models for Developing a Multiethnic Church* (Intervarsity Press, 1996).

⁶ Thomas G. Nees, *The Changing Face of the Church: From American to Global* (Beacon Hill Press, 1997).

⁷ Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (IVP: 1998).

compelling stories from his own congregational experiences. He also relates gripping accounts of the realities faced by immigrants and refugees who arrive in America.

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, in *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*,⁸ inflict a biting rebuke to white evangelicals living in the USA for what they see as their complicity in racial inequities and tensions between blacks and whites. Based on a combination of literary historical sources and hundreds of surveys, these sociologists land a scathing indictment against white conservative Christians and offer their rationale behind evangelical failure to mitigate racism or create multiethnic congregations.

Norman Anthony Peart, in *Separate No More: Understanding and Developing Racial Reconciliation in Your Church*,⁹ identifies reasons why racial reconciliation continues to be an elusive goal among evangelicals and advances corrective measures. The heart of the problem, he contends, is an attitude among white Christians that racial reconciliation, while carrying some importance, is "peripheral and optional." Beginning with the early stages of American history, he shows how white leaders suffered from a deficient anthropology and, once they corrected those views, lacked the courage to translate their improved theology into rectifying behaviors. While bleak, this work is no rant. He does not overlook the anti-slavery movements within the white church and fairly assesses their strengths and weaknesses. In part two he prescribes the biblical pattern, applying a wide swath of sacred texts like medicine to this still-festering racial wound. Lastly, he compares five congregational models that promote racial reconciliation.

Michael Pocock, a missiologist who has served in Venezuela and Joseph

⁸ Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁹ Norman Anthony Peart, *Separate No More: Understanding and Developing Racial Reconciliation in Your Church* (Baker: 2000).

Henriques of Portugal, in *Cultural Change and Your Church: Helping Your Church Thrive in a Diverse Society*,¹⁰ while not directly addressing the multiethnic church per se, shed considerable light on the meaning of culture and put a human face on immigration. One of the more helpful sections for the present study is the way in which Christians finding themselves locked in their own culture can discover new freedom. Also useful, Henriques devotes two chapters on using dialogue to win international people to Christ and pertinent information in diversity training.

Michael O. Emerson, Paul Curtis DeYoung, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, in *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race*,¹¹ respond in part to the bleak diagnostic assessments of Emerson's earlier work, *Divided by Faith*. He and three other sociologists combine their disciplines with that of a theologian, Paul Curtis DeYoung, to advocate multiracial congregations as formidable weapons against racism. Through historical and sociological research, they revisit sober reasons behind today's segregated ethnic churches, ranging from attitudinal racism to church-sanctioned brutality toward people of color in the USA. Beyond this they raise the larger question if this history of racism had never occurred, would people still group themselves into ethnically specific congregations. Their conclusions, drawing from key biblical texts, sociological insights and compassionate stirrings, I found to be pertinent to an international church. While recognizing the challenges of forming heterogeneous churches, these authors contend that all congregations, when possible, should be multicultural.

¹⁰ Joseph Henriques and Michael Pocock, *Cultural Change and Your Church: Helping Your Church Thrive in a Diverse Society* (Baker: 2002).

¹¹ Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (Oxford, 2003).

George Yancey, in *One Body, One Spirit*,¹² fills what Michael O. Emerson calls the “desire-knowledge gap” facing many pastors who desire to build an inclusive church but find themselves long on vision but short on strategy. A strong advocate for the multiracial church, Yancey’s unique contribution is in the way he forms the principles that facilitate the MEC to groundbreaking sociological data gathered from members of racially inclusive congregations. What Yancey draws from these is not hard and fast rules or strategies, but principles which can be applied to each ministry setting which, he insists, must “fit who you already are.”

David A. Anderson, in *Gracism*,¹³ outlines seven grace-inspired actions by which congregations and individuals can reverse practices that exclude and instead include minority people groups of all kinds—racial, gender, culture or class. Writing as a nationally syndicated radio talk show host and founding pastor of a growing multiethnic church (Bridgeway Community, Columbia, Maryland), Anderson approaches the subject in a non-technological style. Drawing principles primarily from 1 Corinthians 12 and James 2:8-9, his work serves as a manual of interpersonal relationships with minorities. It is more than utilitarian, for he ties practical methodology with biblical theology. His popular style diminishes cross-cultural intimidation and makes racial reconciliation look not only theologically correct, but natural, sensible and widely appealing.

Vital Theological Issues for Authentic Multiethnic Community

What do these proponents of the MEC consider to be its theological rudiments on which they base their rationale for launching inclusive congregations? Does the current multicultural ethos come into play? On this question, their unanimous response is aptly

¹² George Yancey, *One Body One Spirit: Principles of Successful Multiracial Churches* (IVP: 2003).

¹³ David A. Anderson, *Gracism: The Art of Inclusion* (IVP: 2007).

captured by Rhodes. "Let me say that as Christians, we should not pursue racial or cultural diversity simply because it is politically correct (or incorrect, as the case may now be), or because it is the latest theological fad, or even because it is a good conservative or liberal idea. We should do it because it is the gospel."¹⁴

A handful of theological themes emerges in what may be understood as essentials for the MEC: critical anthropology, all-encompassing Christology, far-reaching ecclesiology, transformational pneumatology and retroactive eschatology.

Critical Anthropology

The authors noted above begin, not by discussing anthropology per se, but its significant place to both the larger society and the MEC, underscoring two important premises: its corrective role and its urgent priority.

Premium Value

Racial healing begins with sound anthropology. Reversing racial injustice must first correct deficient views of humanity which play into them.¹⁵ How does deep societal change come about through the church? Through a shift in the systems of belief: "Thinking reconciliation precedes doing reconciliation."¹⁶ Core beliefs drive critical choices so that people may "act consistently with truth."¹⁷ Citing biblical examples of personal transformation for support, DeYoung presents Paul, the "staunch religious separatist" who later championed a theology of human equality.

¹⁴ Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet*, 17. Cf. Ortiz, *One New People*, 59-60.

¹⁵ While their views address the deficient attitudes of whites toward indigenous people of color, the principles apply to people groups of all ethnicities.

¹⁶ Peart, *Separate No More*, 49.

¹⁷ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 156.

Peart recounts white attitudes toward blacks, showing how they sprang from erroneous beliefs about people of color. Tracing America's historical eras from slavery (1619) through the post-civil rights era, he argues that the cruel treatment of black people by whites sprang from skewed biblical anthropologies. In the era of slavery, Galatians 3:28 was seen as a threat in how it endowed converted slaves with equality with their masters. "It challenged the belief that was key to the institution of slavery – Negro inferiority." They retorted that slaves need "emancipation from sin, but not the result of sin."¹⁸ Enslaving blacks was ostensibly justified on the basis of evangelistic gain, that is, of Christianizing them. Racial intermarriage was made illegal on the grounds that whites are superior to any person of color. Blacks were deemed dispensable as "living tools," white "property" to be used for their personal benefit. The U.S. Constitution made the slave 3/5 human so that five slaves equaled three white men,¹⁹ matters that are anthropological to the core.

Neglected Priority

No true follower of Christ today would deny that the church should play a role in fostering racial reconciliation. Yet, for Peart, what is tragically absent from evangelical circles is the centrality of that work. By assigning social and racial injustice to second-place priority or to the realm of the State, the church has incurred devastating consequences both on the welfare of people of color and on the credibility of its own witness.²⁰ Racial reconciliation does not digress from the great commission but lies on

¹⁸ Peart, *Separate No More*, 29.

¹⁹ Given these harsh historical realities, one might wonder why Americans of color even considered Christianity. Peart discusses reasons why Christianity grew among slaves and also reasons it was rejected by them. Peart, *Separate No More*, 32-33.

²⁰ Peart, *Separate No More*, 33. See also 40.

its main path as pivotal rather than peripheral. For George Yancey the chief hurdle to resolving racial alienation is “lax motivation,” noting how it fails to get a large response among whites due to “race fatigue.”²¹ David Anderson observed that “Self-preoccupation can keep Christians from experiencing the multicultural, multiracial and multid denominational unity God desires for us.”²²

White American pastors and leaders ministering in contexts populated by blacks would do well to understand the reasons behind the racial divide that has led to their reticence to worship with whites, namely racial abuse.²³ Becoming aware of these is one of the facilitating principles for a MEC advocated by Washington and Kehrein.²⁴ What is it that white evangelicals should know? Whites should clearly understand the anthropologies that have been inculcated through American pulpits and classrooms advancing white superiority over people of color. Continuing vestiges of racism take more subtle forms.²⁵ Talk is one thing and implementing workable solutions another. Washington and Kehrein integrate the gospel of reconciliation with its practice through defining principles and enacting solutions.²⁶

²¹ Yancey, *One Body One Spirit*, 100.

²² Anderson, *Gracism*, 124. He adds, “When Christians stop reacting negatively to sociopolitical terminology like *affirmative action*, *special interest* or *equal opportunity*, and instead use Paul’s terms *special honor*, *greater honor* and *equal concern*, it will change our attitudes from a “me and mine” to a “we and ours” mentality.”

²³ “African Americans are the most difficult to attract” to the MEC. Yancey, *One Body*, 157. See also 21. Historical reasons for segregated churches in America are explained in DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 104 ff. For a definition of “racialized society,” see Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 7, 11.

²⁴ This principle of “sensitivity” refers to “the intentional acquisition of knowledge in order to relate empathetically to a person of a different race and culture.” Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 155.

²⁵ For example, “For many citizens of the U.S., ‘white’ Christianity is the norm and other racially specific congregations are ‘special’ ministries. Many denominations have separate departments to serve the unique needs of culturally or racially specific congregations made up of persons of color. Yet we are unaware of any departments devoted to supporting white congregations as an explicitly stated mission.” DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 123.

²⁶ For their sense of optimistic reality, see Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 12.

Essential Humanity

Three theological tenets profoundly bear on humanity and shape community life in the MEC. Critical for creating an authentic inclusive community are the doctrine of creation that distinguishes, redemption that cherishes and sanctification that transforms human beings.

Equal Value as God's Image Bearers. The MEC takes anthropology seriously because it understands itself to exist on the supposition that no matter how many ethnic groups compose the population, they must do so on a level playing field. It matters who, or better, what equalizes the opportunities on that field. Both Rhodes and Pocock correctly point to Genesis as that agent of equity, presenting three critical "fundamental realities" of a Christian view of humanity: all people are made in the image of God, all have fallen and stand in need of a Savior and all are placed in solidarity with the rest. No one stands alone. Surprisingly, only Pocock and Rhodes directly referenced the *imago Dei* from Genesis 1:26-28 as a basis for racial relations in an MEC. The near absence of this biblical basis was striking.²⁷

Universal Disorder. Human resistance to God, a "common thread running through the [MEC] audience"²⁸ takes modern forms of apartheid, caste tradition and the HUP. Racism is a spiritual disease contaminating the mind. For Pocock, it arises from "sinful propensity" with its roots in ethnocentrism, nationalism and traditionalism,²⁹ tendencies to be mitigated in the ongoing life of ethnic diversity. He notes these as roots

²⁷ Scriptural support of racial equality for Yancey is found in Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 12:13, Galatians 3:28, Revelation 5:9, Peter's attitudinal change in Acts 11:4-18 and the Antioch in Acts 11:19-21.

²⁸ Ortiz, *One New People*, 55.

²⁹ Pocock, *Cultural Change*, 36. Cf. 43, 49.

of intercultural friction that contaminate relationships and send a message to outsiders that says "Keep Out." "When laced with sin, these three elements can really cloud our judgment when it comes to dealing with those who are different than us."³⁰ Manuel Ortiz recognizes five obstacles to forming an MEC, several overlapping with those of Pocock: tradition, syncretism, thinking patterns, family clans, discipling and leadership training. He adds to these the "redemptive lift," finding Christ and then relocating out of poverty to the suburbs.³¹ Rhodes and Pocock assign God's judgment resulting from the Tower of Babel not to diversity of culture and language as many commonly interpret it. The sin of the Tower builders, they assert, was their rejection of "the pluriform nature of creation that God has willed as the people impose a self-styled unity."³² Beneath the surface of their need for power and "making a name for themselves" was "the fear of being scattered across the earth." Their consolidation became a "supreme act of defiance."³³ True diversity is a divine gift that distinguishes itself from pluralism as a vain facsimile wrought by human engineering.³⁴ The modern counterpart, the HUP, says Rhodes, results with the same "re-segregation" because the focus is on "particular cultures without a unifying identity."³⁵ Emerson and Smith argue that failure in the U.S.A. takes the form of racialized society "wherein race matters profoundly for differences in life

³⁰ Pocock. *Cultural Change*, 36.

³¹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 95. He wrote, "When I became a Christian, I recognized that the world had infiltrated the church and that the life of the church was in most cases segregated, by design and by desire, on the basis of racism and ethnocentrism... The church did more than meet together because of similarities; it practiced exclusion toward those who were dissimilar." Ortiz, *One New People*, 15.

³² Rhodes, *Nations*, 25.

³³ Rhodes, *Nations*, 25.

³⁴ Rhodes, *Nations*, 28.

³⁵ Rhodes, *Nations*, 30.

experiences, life opportunities, and social relationships.”³⁶ Not only has the white evangelical church failed to heal; it contributes to the disease.

Single Human Family

Rhodes develops thematically the roster of seventy nations in Genesis 10, particularly how it points to divine attentiveness to the nations beyond Israel from the beginning and how this unity of the human family establishes early a basis for the MEC in the NT.³⁷ God’s call to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3 is the “fulcrum text” moving from curse to blessing on the heels of Babel.

Ethnicity without Ethnocentricity. Surprisingly, a theology of ethnicity is scarce in most of these writers. The focus on unity in diversity often becomes an abstract ideal with little discussion of the meaning of various ethnicities in one congregation. For instance, does the MEC advance a theology of oneness at the expense of cultural particularity? The authors rightly emphasized reconciliation and equality, but discussion on the meaning of ethnicity would have been welcomed. A notable exception was Rhodes who, citing missiologist Lesslie Newbigin, placed a greater emphasis on families. “The Bible does not speak about “humanity” but about “all the families of the earth” or “all the nations.” It follows that this mutual relatedness, this dependence of one on another, is not merely part of the journey toward the goal of salvation, but is intrinsic to the goal itself.”³⁸

In addition, he made important distinctions between modern American multiculturalism which lacks a center and has produced, in Arthur Schlesinger’s phrase,

³⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 7.

³⁷ Rhodes, *Nations*, 39.

³⁸ Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 82; quoted in Rhodes, *Nations*, 24.

a “cult of ethnicity” ... “producing a nation of minorities.”³⁹ That focus “on the particularization of our cultural lives, emphasizing group, ethnic and tribal identity over any other unifying social or national identity,”⁴⁰ further divides the country. According to Michael Lind who concurs with Schlesinger, “These races are not mere ingredients to be blended in a future unity, but permanently distinct communities.”⁴¹

All-Encompassing Christology

Christology for the MEC must combine transcendence, accessibility and breadth. It must transcend local provincialism, be within reach of an ailing and fallen culture and extend far enough to draw in the full range of a diversely populated humanity.

Comprehensive Person

Sovereign of the Universe. The MEC exists through Christ’s transnational reign. Thus, Jesus Christ and his community refuse to side with any ethnic group to the exclusion of others. Sounding this note establishes his relation to the cosmos (Heb 1:2-3), noting that Jesus Christ is the exalted Lord of the Universe (Eph 8:18; 2:11-22) rather than a national deity. For Ortiz, this manifests the gospel’s fullness:

Until now we might have thought of God as siding with our cultural group and with our concerns alone. But the diverse group in the sanctuary reminds us that our God is also active in other lands, caring for the child in Bangladesh and the mother in the Tijuana countryside as well as the young man who is selling his wares in northern Nigeria.⁴²

³⁹ Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (NY: W. W. Norton, 1992), 112; quoted in Rhodes, *Nations*, 30.

⁴⁰ Rhodes. *Nations*, 30.

⁴¹ Michael Lind, *The Next American Nation* (NY: Free Press, 1995), 12; quoted in Rhodes, *Nations*, 32. By “races” he identifies five ethnic groups: “white, black, Hispanic, Asian and Pacific Islander, and Native American.”

⁴² Ortiz, *One New People*, 12-13.

In contrast to a global conception of God, congregations oriented to HUP principles unwittingly reduce the Person of Christ through a singular cultural lens. Ortiz continues, "I believe that we limit the greatness of our Lord when we know God only as a local God who speaks our language and understands our conditions alone." Such depictions afforded by the MEC catapult him above grand empires and local traditions and demotes ethno-deities into mere national mascots.

Head of the Church

As Head over the MEC, Christ pushes the church outwardly, forbidding it the luxury of prolonged homespun comfort. DeYoung points out how the original twelve, though all Jews, hardly represented a comfortable homogenous group within Judaism. The perpetuation of the church in Acts continued more of the same intentional diversity. Can the Lord over all, and Head over the church be bound by human tradition, ethnocentrism and national zealotry? That answer will depend on whether the church follows its Leader.

Christ's Earthly Presence through His Body

God embodied through the incarnation is both a historical fact and an ongoing pattern for the church. Racial reconciliation, says Ortiz, is possible "only within the incarnational setting."⁴³ Crucial for Ortiz in this regard is physical relocation: "The incarnational piece is a call to relocate into a poor minority community."⁴⁴ It means "cross-cultural ministry: Going where people are."⁴⁵ Clearly, the historic incarnation of Christ is a pattern for all believers. Emerson and Smith place church location as a chief

⁴³ Ortiz, *One New People*, 105.

⁴⁴ Ortiz, *One New People*, 105.

⁴⁵ Ortiz, *One New People*, 105.

factor contributing to race alienation,. Residential segregation and white flight into HUP churches socially isolate white and blacks from each other.⁴⁶ Yancey ranks location as one of his five critical factors of successful MECs.⁴⁷ Residential segregation in America, he finds, both “amazing and discouraging,” making MEC churches so hard to create. People of color find white flight to be insulting and urban churches which once housed white congregations now house minority congregations.⁴⁸ White churches that exit from city to suburb are “in effect rejecting racial minorities, and people of color are rightly turned off by this rejection.”⁴⁹ Evidence of churches located in white suburbs attracting racial minorities is scant.⁵⁰

Nees quotes denominational leader, Paul Cunningham, who stated a sobering demographic trend: “We left the cities, and then the new America moved to the cities.” Cunningham challenged status quo thinking about relocating congregations to better neighborhoods.⁵¹ Significant for the MEC, demographer and futurist Russ Bredholt Jr. after a study on the Church of the Nazarene, commented on a truth that is easily overlooked: “A congregation’s future is directly related to its ability to make a meaningful connection with households that are nearby.”⁵²

⁴⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 7.

⁴⁷ “A church’s decision to move or, sometimes more importantly, not to move has a powerful effect on whether the church can meet its goal of developing a multiracial environment.” Yancey, *One Body*, 129.

⁴⁸ Yancey, *One Body*, 130.

⁴⁹ Yancey, *One Body*, 130.

⁵⁰ Yancey, *One Body*, 130.

⁵¹ Nees, *New Face of the Church*, 36.

⁵² Nees, *New Face of the Church*, 28.

For Peart, the incarnate life of Jesus “exudes reconciliation,” was manifest in his ethnic inclusion, and agrees with Athanasius that “incarnation is reconciliation.”⁵³ This was manifest in Jesus’ ethnic inclusion. Washington and Kehrein draw two related principles from the incarnation that are required for the MEC: intentionality and sacrifice. Intentionality, the “locomotive that drives racial reconciliation,” recognizes that “blacks and whites can work side by side, live side by side, even go to church together, and still not be in a meaningful relationship with one another.” Drawing from Philippians 2:3-5, this principle “gives priority to purposeful, positive, and planned activity that facilitates reconciliation.”⁵⁴ Sacrifice has to do with letting go of power and position to embrace a relationship cross-culturally. Sacrifice means that it will not be comfortable and “we must be prepared to sacrifice”⁵⁵ in matters of time, money, prestige, culinary preferences as well as the dominant groups willingness to relinquish leadership positions.

Jesus, says DeYoung, was the “precursor to multicultural congregations.”⁵⁶ From cradle to grave, his life was radically inclusive as noted by DeYoung, Peart and Ortiz. Pocock called this inclusion a frontal attack on the xenophobia practiced by his contemporaries.⁵⁷

Christ's Reconciling Cross

For Washington and Kehrein, the saving work of Christ as described in Ephesians 2:14-15 and 2 Corinthians 5:16-21, carries universal significance and forms

⁵³ Peart, *Separate No More*, 116.

⁵⁴ Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 125.

⁵⁵ Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 187.

⁵⁶ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 18.

⁵⁷ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change and Your Church*, 36.

the “bedrock” for dual reconciliation.⁵⁸ Christ unifies all believers through the span of his redemptive sacrifice. They draw from Acts 15:14; 19-20 which really are not unity texts per se. Unity comes from the “reconciliation” won at the cross (2 Cor 5:20) says Rhodes. Quoting from Harvey Cox’s citation from the diary of a southern white preacher who was part of the Azusa Street revival in Los Angeles, a revival that was interracial from the beginning: I “was first offended and startled, then inspired, by the fact that...the color line was washed away by the blood.”⁵⁹

The way in which racial reconciliation becomes fleshed out is commendably described by Emerson and Smith in a section entitled, “The Beginnings of Modern Evangelical Reconciliation Thought and Activity.”⁶⁰ The first serious steps taken in the USA were by pioneers like John Perkins, Tom Skinner, James Earl Massey, William Pannell, E.V. Hill and Samuel Hines. Notably absent at the fore of this movement is the name of a white evangelical. The authors show how whites find themselves “unable to see the depths of racialized society” because they have not been on the losing end of the injustices.⁶¹

Lest blame end at an impasse, the first reconciling act begets ongoing reconciliation. Washington and Kehrein show convincingly how the cross produces empowerment to forgive cruelty, forging new relationships instead of settling old

⁵⁸ Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 106. “It has already happened, and yet is still in process. We have been reconciled to God through conversion; we are a new creation... This is an accomplished fact. But this reconciliation must continue to work through us, crossing racial, social, and sexual barriers by means of the ministry of reconciliation empowered by God through Christ to work in and through us.”

⁵⁹ Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1995), 14-15, quoted by Rhodes, *Nations*, 75.

⁶⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 52-54.

⁶¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 55.

scores.⁶² They hasten to point out that “true reconciliation only works when both repentance and forgiveness are mutually exchanged.”⁶³ But true reconcilers make the “first move” whether or not the promise of reciprocation is present. It is grace that moves the heart toward such ends.⁶⁴

Approaching the fourth essential doctrine for the MEC, we may ask how all of these themes will impact the church’s nature, mission and constituents. After considering the Bible’s equal-opportunity anthropology followed by a Lord who is exalted above the nations and over the church, yet accessible to all through his incarnation, and through his death for all, having set in motion the moral motivations supplied by grace that all may become peace-takers and peace-makers among all people, it follows that anything other than a far-reaching ecclesiology will strike a discordant sound.

An MEC Christology, then, expresses the comprehensive themes of Jesus’ exalted position above all nations and church, his chosen path of condescension on earth and his sacrificial act through which he extends reconciliation to humanity in its ethnic totality.

⁶² “Repentance and forgiveness are the primary empowering agents that set us free—Gentiles and Jews, whites and blacks, Hispanic and Asians—to relate to each other in confidence and without reservation. This is true personally and corporately. An attitude of repentance empowers the other person—or group, or race—to lay aside anger and blame, and opens the path of forgiveness.” Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 198.

⁶³ Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 199.

⁶⁴ Keeping step with this theme, the following prayer starts the process: “Dear Lord, please forgive me for my insensitivities toward the hurting and downtrodden...Help me to be more gracist in my life, more concerned. Father, I thank you for your grace, mercy and compassion on me.” Anderson, *Gracism*, 123.

Wide Ranging Ecclesiology

The earliest church followed in the footsteps of Jesus.⁶⁵ Peart quips astutely that “the apple does not fall far from the tree” and that inclusive notes heard in all four Gospel accounts echo throughout the book of Acts. The MEC offers segregated society a radical alternative. The church at its best will be a healing agent for society’s racial divisions, and an authentic MEC is the church at its best indeed. DeYoung lauds the Antioch church as the NT model. That city’s longstanding racial issues make the placement of a vibrant MEC there even more striking.⁶⁶ He makes a similar case in the MEC at Rome which was composed of Jews and Gentiles. Peart echoes how the world desperately longs to see an alternative to its own fallen norms of cultural bigotry and ethnic prejudice. “It [secular culture] has for too long heard about the oneness of those in Christ without seeing this unity manifested in day-to-day interactions between the races. Only a gospel that is hoisted high on the back of a living, vibrant, socially manifested faith will greatly impact our humanistic culture for Jesus.”⁶⁷

Now we turn to questions of ecclesiology that the authors identify that will buoy community in a multicultural church.

Interethnic Ecclesiology Expresses the Scope of Election. The demographic composition of a congregation ought to reflect the scope of divine election. Without

⁶⁵ DeYoung, et al. writes, “...the congregation in Jerusalem began with a rich multicultural flavor. Yet many in Jerusalem regarded the individuals in this culturally and linguistically diverse Jerusalem congregation as marginal persons. Second-class Galilean Jews and migrant Hellenized Jews made up the membership of this first church.” DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 23.

⁶⁶ “Ethnic strife was intense...Race riots were common because so many people of differing ethnic and cultural groups lived together in cramped, overcrowded conditions. Sociologist Rodney Stark adds that Antioch was ‘a city filled with hatred and fear rooted in intense ethnic antagonisms and exacerbated by a constant stream of strangers...a city so lacking in stable networks of attachments that petty incidents could prompt mob violence.’ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 27.

⁶⁷ Peart, *Separate No More*, 114.

addressing the theological debates surrounding the doctrine of election, the authors base inclusive election upon the breadth of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:1-3; Isa 2:1-5; 60:2-3; Zech 8:20-22), the great commission (Matt 28:16-20; Mark 16:15-17; Luke 24:46-49) and the new humanity in Christ that abolishes ethnocentrism (Eph 2:14-15, 19). "Paul was intent on ensuring that congregations of the church of God began and remained multicultural. For Paul, an ethnic group was not the basis for a church"⁶⁸ and stops short of expressing the fuller range of God's inclusion.

Interdependence Expresses One Body. The church as one body with many parts points to a relationship of interdependence. It tells us that we need each other (1 Cor 12:12-27) and that one part cannot tell another, 'I have no need of you.'⁶⁹ Therefore, the MEC models a spirit of cooperation and interdependence rather than competition and isolation. As such, it submits to Christ as Head of the body. A MEC, writes Ortiz, "takes away our haughtiness – our belief that we are more important and more knowledgeable than anyone else."

The New Man Transcends Racial Compartmentalization. In the life of a MEC, sooner or later collisions between cultural groups are bound to occur. What will protect it from the diabolical forces of ethnocentricity, nationalism or traditionalism? How do members of any congregation rise above these propensities of fallen human nature? Can each culture be kept in check, especially given the natural tendency to look out for the welfare of one's own group at the expense of others? The pitch in the voices of these authors rises here! Moving past condemnations of the HUP, they become animated by

⁶⁸ Peart, *Separate No More*, 32.

⁶⁹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 13.

the gospel's creative force to make something entirely new. Converging on texts such as Ephesians 2:11-22, they articulate the recreation from the raw materials of ethnic diversity into an entirely new corporate *Anthropos*. Separate cultures merge together into what the Spirit is creating as the "Christ culture." Rhodes refers to true believers as "a transcendent culture" that rises above racial compartmentalization and reaching what Ortiz believes to be the goal of Scripture in the creation of a "new humanity, growing in Christ and transcending culture."⁷⁰ This new humanity moves the church from "individualism to solidarity. Quoting Padilla,

The Bible knows nothing of the human being as an individual in isolation; it knows only of a person as a related being, a person in relation to other people.... Accordingly, the church is viewed in the New Testament as the solidarity that has been created in Jesus Christ and that stands in contrast with the old humanity represented by Adam.⁷¹

Ortiz, in explaining various effective MEC models in describing this "new humanity"⁷² draws from Galatians 3:28 which states that "in Jesus Christ a new reality has come into being...a unity based on faith in Him, in which membership is in no way dependent upon race, social status, or sex."⁷³ For him, this passage surpasses a formless spirituality into "concrete community made up of Jews and Gentiles, slave and free, men and women, all of them as equal members of the Christ-solidarity."⁷⁴ This concrete reality for Paul is "not a hope, but a fact."⁷⁵ He takes special note of Korean pastor Mark Oh of the International Bible Church in Los Angeles. This church was

⁷⁰ Ortiz, *One New Body*, 25.

⁷¹ Rene Padilla quoted by Ortiz, *One New Body*, 124.

⁷² Ortiz, *One New Body*, 111.

⁷³ Ortiz, *One New Body*, 147.

⁷⁴ Ortiz, *One New Body*, 147.

⁷⁵ Ortiz, *One New Body*, 147.

founded in 1972 on the conviction that Jesus' command to "make disciples of all nations (*panta ta ethne*) in Matthew 28:19, "He meant all ethnic groups [with regard to color, race, language, culture and national origin] of the world. Emerging from this ethnic mixture Oh refers to as the "Christ culture"⁷⁶ and in real life "in Christ, who is the paradigm of lived transcendence...the believers can...follow in His steps, transcending all human distinctions to reach others for Jesus Christ."⁷⁷ This new man is also called the "New Adam," emphasizing solidarity among believers. Quoting Padilla, "the church is viewed in the New Testament as the solidarity that has been created in Jesus Christ and that stands in contrast with the old humanity represented by Adam."⁷⁸

DeYoung conceives this "new Man" as a new "synthesis" of people groups without each losing its distinctive contributions to our view of God.⁷⁹ How does this work? It happens when "people move beyond simply representing their separate groups" in which "over time, a new culture is developed, one that did not exist before."⁸⁰ The emergent culture becomes superior to any one of the original constituents. One example of how improvement results from mixing multiple human groups is drawn from Latino life, the concept of *mestizaje*: "The rich Latin cultures would not exist without such mixing." Here "lie the seeds of the multiracial congregations."⁸¹ A similar benefit has

⁷⁶ Ortiz, *One New Body*, 92.

⁷⁷ Mark Oh quoted by Ortiz, *One New Body*, 92.

⁷⁸ Rene Padilla quoted by Ortiz, *One New Body*, 124.

⁷⁹ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 138-40.

⁸⁰ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 139.

⁸¹ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 138. "If being ... a [MEC] simply means people of color have to conform to a dominant group's beliefs and practices, then arguments for separation may well win the day. But if being a true multiracial church means spiritual *mestizaje*, then we have people and groups coming together to worship, learn, and care for one another. This would include encouraging cultural development and working side by side for liberation. If a true [MEC] is this . . . then power and hope can best be found in our coming together."

emerged in African American spirituality.⁸² He adds that “the beauty and power of culture are realized...when they are shared and lived with people raised in different cultures.”

Such integration requires more than surface measures.

The argument that we must get beyond incorporating people in a superficial manner – sing a few songs from the culture, say a few prayers in Spanish, get some people involved in the work of the church – is a powerful one that sharpens the definition of what it means to be truly multiracial. This is not something to play at. It is serious business, involving the eternal lives of real people. Becoming a multiracial congregation is not an afterthought that we ‘tack on’ to our normal way of doing church; it is a fundamental shift in understanding and practice.⁸³

What authenticating sign identifies this new creation of the Spirit within secular culture? In a society where opposing cultures, Jews and Gentiles, would never be sharing a meal, that sign is table fellowship. What truly marked fellowship as Christian was not so much what was placed on but who was seated around the table. DeYoung and Walls both demonstrate how the breaking of bread between Jew and Gentile conspicuously tagged Christians in the first century. The practice of racial reconciliation finds its most definitive expression at the table meal.⁸⁴

Temple of God. Pocock weaves together a backdrop of Old and New Testament texts tying the MEC to the temple. He combines Solomon’s prayer in 1 Kings 8:22-53, the Old Testament prediction of the “centripetal” ingathering of the nations at the temple in Isaiah 56:7 and the nature of the New Testament church in Galatians 3:26-29,

⁸² Theologian Carlyle Fielding Steward III writes that this spirituality “has coalesced the best of both worlds into a framework for human existence, and that its genius synthesizes certain aspects of Anglo and African cultures, thereby forming a unique African American identity.” Cited by DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 138.

⁸³ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 139-40.

⁸⁴ Andrew Walls writes, “Two lifestyles [Jew and Gentile] met at the institution that had once symbolized the ethnic and cultural division: the meal table. One of the most noticeable features of life in the Jesus community in Jerusalem had been that the followers of Jesus took every opportunity to eat together...The followers of Jesus took the same custom to Antioch, and beyond...The shared table was the acid test. It stood for diverse humanity redeemed by Christ and sharing in him.” Andrew Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History*, 77-8.

Ephesians 2:1 – 3:6 and 1 Peter 2:9-12. In short, the MEC is an international house of prayer attracting people from all nations who are hungry for God. The temple motif in the OT is the locus of attraction, the place in which divine glory shines. Pocock traces the “temple” theme to show how God attracts the nations to himself through his Presence shining through it. Starting with the temple as a building of mortar containing God’s shekinah glory, he shows how God through the Spirit becomes “housed” in a human being in the person of the Christ. Finally, the temple takes human form in the person of Christ and then expanded by the Spirit to the church, the house of God. The MEC’s unique beauty shines through its assortment of cultures and languages in a way that visibly adorns the gospel of reconciliation and through which the divine presence holds universal attraction. This magnetic pull through the people of God becomes the vehicle of salvation.

Having noted how biblical anthropology, Christology and ecclesiology are thought to contribute to the shape of the MEC, we are ready to ask what creative force can merge historic truth with contemporary life. Forging together today’s broad mix of races and cultures into a unified and animated organism will require more than human ingenuity.

Transformational Pneumatology

The MEC, according to a shared conviction of the authors we have reviewed, is a work of God produced by the divine Spirit through the divine Word. Stephen Rhodes, in his Trinitarian theology for the MEC, refers to the Spirit as the “mover and the shaker” of its multicultural witness.⁸⁵ Pocock, in citing Jesus words recorded in Acts 1:8, calls the

⁸⁵ Rhodes, *Nations*, 73.

possession of the Spirit “the great condition”⁸⁶ for this work since interethnic reconciliation is “a working of the Holy Spirit and not the result of carefully crafted strategies or plans.”⁸⁷ How does the Holy Spirit bring shape to the MEC? He forms and sustains it in five pivotal ways: by creating unity among diverse racial and social groups, by overcoming challenges, conflicts and deadlocks that are incumbent upon cross-cultural ministry, by turning ethnocentric individuals into a collective “new Man” and through His scattered body, by shining the glory of God’s presence in the world amidst all cultures and, finally, by enabling gospel witness in cross-cultural settings in ways that promote conversion rather than enculturation.

The Word of God Prevails over the Pull of Culture

Given the degree that human beings are bound in thought patterns by cultural conditioning, by what means can they find freedom? The authors unanimously assign that role to Scripture. Henricks refers to it as a key that unlocks “culture bound people,” empowering them to “open our culture’s sliding glass doors at will.”⁸⁸ Ortiz views it as a “Scriptural promise which the MEC fulfills.”⁸⁹ For Pocock, biblical truth serves the MEC as “the compass for the journey to navigate U.S.A. cultural waters”⁹⁰ as well as the catalyst enabling the church to resist ministerial status quo and predictability. The Word converts both individual believers and the corporate body, rescuing the latter from the predictable norms of a racially segregated society through cross-cultural obedience. The

⁸⁶ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 36.

⁸⁷ Peart, *Separate No More*, 17.

⁸⁸ Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 101. He finds the basis of this freedom in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23.

⁸⁹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 93.

⁹⁰ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 21.

“breadth of biblical revelation,” its unchanging “authority and universality,” creates the new humanity.⁹¹

One cautionary flag should be raised for any MEC. Ortiz argues for a “commitment to truth, not culture” in a way that avoids the trap of multiculturalism: “Will the audience dominate and the authority of the Word become subject to culture?”⁹² The Spirit has created a new ontological reality in the church. Incarnational reconciliation through the Spirit in the church continues Christ’s reconciling work on the cross.

If the MEC is so biblically obvious, how do we explain why it is slow in coming among evangelicals who embrace scriptural authority? Given the way authors such as Peart show how Scripture functioned powerfully to produce social as well as personal change during the anti-slavery movements,⁹³ this defies logic. Does it arise from willful defiance, careless oversight or cultural conditioning on the part of evangelicals? Do they read biblical texts through rigid homogenous lenses, or simply resist the transparently clear demands of the gospel? It is as though, maintains Peart, we restrict ourselves to living in Acts 1-9.⁹⁴

Emerson and Smith recognize that in matters of racial relations, something is “lost in the translation” and explain that something happened when the message of reconciliation went from blacks to a white audience and was “popularized” for the masses. When that happened, it called for individuals to develop relationships rather

⁹¹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 111. See also 147.

⁹² Peart, *Separate No More*, 60. “The goal of multiculturalism should not be increased cultural sensitivity or inclusivism so that no one is locked outside the gate...Rather, it should be to see the church, by way of multiethnicity, inclusivism and cultural sensitivity, bring about biblical reconciliation, justice and righteousness in the church and in society.”

⁹³ Peart, *Separated No More*, 34-35.

⁹⁴ Peart notes that while the Holy Spirit was the agent of racial reconciliation who was given at Pentecost in Acts 2, the gospel’s “universality” was not understood by the Church until Acts 10:9-16. Peart, *Separated No More*, 119.

than bringing “system-changing components” to reverse the injustices. For blacks the solution to the racial problem tended to be found in structural change while for whites at the grassroots they were personal.⁹⁵ Their personal “evangelical solution” was two-fold in what Emerson calls, “Let’s be friends” and the “miracle motif.”⁹⁶ The latter is the “theologically rooted idea that as more individuals become Christians, social and personal problems will be solved automatically. What is the solution to violent crime? Convert people to Christianity, because Christians do not commit violent crimes.” This “top-down” approach expresses equality interpersonally,⁹⁷ commendable in itself, but too restricted in their view.

The Church Transforms Culture or Culture Pollutes the Church

Congregations must choose either to resist the corruption of its surrounding culture or itself become corrupted by it. The dynamic of reciprocity that Reverend Albert Barnes applies to the blatant evil of slavery could extend to the more subtle malevolence of segregated congregations.

The church will affect the institution of slavery, or the institution of slavery will affect the church. It will send out a healthful moral influence to secure its removal, or the system will send out a corrupt influence into the church itself, to mould the opinions of its members, to corrupt their piety, to make them apologists for oppression and wrong, and to secure its sanction in sustaining the system itself.⁹⁸

Could we say that decades of racial segregation have had a similar corrupting affect, not only upon society at large, but more profoundly leaving an indelible stain similar upon the church? No congregation is impervious to the influence of either the Word or the

⁹⁵ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 66-67.

⁹⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 116-7.

⁹⁷ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 117.

⁹⁸ Albert Barnes, *The Church and Slavery* (NY: Negro Universities Press, 1857), 22; quoted in Peart, *Separate No More*, 38.

world. Those that genuinely consecrate themselves to God cannot help but change their surrounding culture. Anderson proposes “elevators of grace” to mitigate unchecked racial inequality by “raising a voice for those who do not have a voice...Who is speaking for the Latinos, African Americans, Asians, females or children at the board room tables in your church?”⁹⁹

Spiritual Unity Transcends Cultural Uniformity

The Church Growth Movement (CGM) rejected the MEC partly because minority groups were assumed to be required to mimic the dominant culture.¹⁰⁰ Unity, then, means “just be like us,” says DeYoung,¹⁰¹ referring to uniformity shaped by the main group. Answering this charge, he places unity on a higher basis than any single culture: “Christ came to liberate people, to announce supernatural unity while respecting and celebrating particularity.”¹⁰² The religious traditionalists of Jesus’ day denounced his racially inclusivity because their “identity [was] based on the separatist features of Israelite law.”¹⁰³ A racially homogenous congregation places too much importance in sociological reasons for its solidarity. By contrast, DeYoung distinguishes the member of the true church by the NT term “Christian” as first understood in its original setting: a “follower of Jesus Christ whose way of life is racial reconciliation.”¹⁰⁴ In the first century

⁹⁹ Anderson, *Gracism*, 55.

¹⁰⁰ See Korie L. Edwards, *The Elusive Dream: The Power of Race in Interracial Churches* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2008). For a discussion on the tentative nature of congregational multicultural unity, see Kathleen Garces-Foley, *Crossing the Ethnic Divide: The Multiethnic Church on a Mission* (NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 146-47.

¹⁰¹ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 128.

¹⁰² DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 117.

¹⁰³ Howard Clark Kee, *Who Are the People of God: Early Christian Models of Community* (New Haven, CONN: Yale University Press, 1995), 190; quoted in DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 129.

of antagonistic cultures that label was “so unique that none of the prevailing religious designations fit... There were no social organizations this inclusive. Their radical blending of people called for a new name. So they were labeled Christ followers—that is, Christians.”¹⁰⁵ The MEC then is composed of those from whatever ethnic heritage who actively accept people outside of their own circles.

Where unity flows from a common obedience for DeYoung, David Anderson posits it in the triune Godhead (Deut 6:4; John 10:30; 14:11; 17:22). Since God is singular by nature and believers are called to be one in him, “then division and disunity cannot be allowed to coexist among us.”¹⁰⁶ Believers pray to a common Father, Jesus’ longest prayer was for the “oneness of his offspring,” and his submissive resolve in praying “Yet not as I will, but as you will,” regained oneness among believers, “reversing the effects of division born in the Garden of Eden.”¹⁰⁷

For this unity to occur, Nees states that it requires organizational measures of “infusion” and “inclusion.” By infusion he means efforts to open itself to minorities without “taking advantage of their unique interests and contribution.” It is they who must make the changes to fit in. “Inclusion” is the process by which leaders “welcome minorities and assume responsibility for making changes in the culture of the organization.”¹⁰⁸

Multiculturalism lacking in these spiritual resources that come through submission to God and to his Word will likely fail to bring the ideal community of social harmony among all creatures to which it aspires. Rhodes demonstrates how it actually

¹⁰⁵ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ Anderson, *Gracism*, 102.

¹⁰⁷ Anderson, *Gracism*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Nees, *Changing Face of the Church*, 74.

threatens to effect the opposite result, striking division rather than unity.¹⁰⁹ Nees contends that “as an ideology it tends to divide and exclude” in the way that it “encourages new social groupings.” In other words, within the large global circle sit clusters of racially homogeneous units. That is what distinguishes the ideology from the goals of a healthy fully-functioning MEC. If an MEC is nothing more than a collection of sub-groups, it may meet “multiethnic” standards but still fall short of community.

Theology is culturally conditioned and the materials at hand have to be “converted” with each new culture. “Conversion... is about turning what is already there; it is more about direction than content.”¹¹⁰ By using concepts that are understood by the audience, translations do not negate tradition but enhance it. For Walls,

The Ephesian question at the Ephesian moment is whether or not the church in all its diversity will demonstrate its unity by the interactive participation in all its culture-specific segments, the interactive participation that is to be expected in a functioning body. Will the body of Christ be realized or fractured in this new Ephesian moment?”¹¹¹

Another important aspect of a transformative pneumatology is the relationship between the unity of the Spirit in the congregation and the liberty of the Spirit in the life of an individual or subgroup. Individual Christian liberty is not to be understood as unbridled freedom, says DeYoung. He pinpoints the crux of the issue as one of authority, that is, who will have the last word in church practices. Do I as an individual Christian have the final say on where I worship? From what authoritative source does one find an

¹⁰⁹ Walter Brueggemann writes, “There are two kinds of unity. On the one hand, God wills a unity which permits and encourages scattering. The unity willed by God is that all of humankind shall be in covenant with him ([Gen] 9:8-11) and with him only, responding to his purposes, relying on his life-giving power.” Then there is “a different kind of unity sought by fearful humanity organized against the purposes of God. This unity attempts to establish a cultural, human oneness without reference to the threats, promises, or mandates of God. This is a self-made unity in which humanity has a ‘fortress mentality.’ It seeks to survive by its own resources.” James L. Mays and Patrick D. Miller, eds., *Interpretation Series*, vol. 1, *Genesis*, by Walter Brueggemann (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 91; quoted in Rhodes, *Nations*, 26.

¹¹⁰ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 81.

¹¹¹ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 81.

answer? It is not, he asserts, in the highly treasured founding documents of a great country: "The fundamental creed of the United States of America – that individuals are endowed with rights and freedoms and that there should be liberty and justice for all – does not have such power."¹¹² He points out that this creed has led to about 90 percent of congregations in the U.S.A. as racially homogeneous.¹¹³ Thus a higher tradition has been subordinated, namely the pattern and teaching of the Lord Jesus Christ. His clarification became a great help to this pastor in navigating tensions between civil religion and biblical obedience that will be elaborated in Chapter 5.

Peart draws from Peter's prejudice against non-Jewish people that arose from cherished tradition that were not erased by the infusion of the Spirit at Pentecost, but must eventually be abandoned. But now, a new tradition would begin, one of startling inclusion through divine visitation rather than predictable exclusion through religious inflexibility. For Peart, customs are validated or invalidated by their source: "God is the only legitimate basis for religious tradition."¹¹⁴

We belong together through Jesus Christ. This requires freedom to affirm culture within biblical grounds: "And in that unity our cultural differences coexist (Acts 15:14; 19-20)."¹¹⁵ "The Church must be diverse because humanity is diverse. The Church must be one because Christ is one,"¹¹⁶ says Walls. He bases MEC unity in the power of the Spirit rather than a particular lifestyle. He argues that "Acts 15 produced two distinct Christian lifestyles but not two Christian communities, a Jewish church and Gentile church."

¹¹² DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 4.

¹¹³ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 4.

¹¹⁴ Peart, *Separate No More*, 102-3.

¹¹⁵ Harvie M. Conn in Ortiz, *One New People*, with a foreword by Harvie M. Conn, 11.

¹¹⁶ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 77.

Sanctification then becomes not so much conformity to timeless external ethical codes, but “guidance of the Holy Spirit, the way of life of Jesus...” and “developing a whole new Christian lifestyle in new conditions.”¹¹⁷

The Spirit Meets New Challenges Posed by Mixed Cultures

Maintaining unity in a diverse body poses challenges. The fact that the coexistence of diverse groups will make for a bumpier ride should not deter the MEC vision, but simply prod leaders to seek divine resources in making the path smooth. That, according to DeYoung is the reason Luke includes how church leaders handled the crisis in Acts 6, to demonstrate how the “Jerusalem church faced head-on the challenges posed by diversity with action that was prayerful, immediate, empowering, and that further implemented Jesus’ vision of a house of prayer for all the nations.”¹¹⁸

Another challenge to unity is the “embarrassment factor” that calls for the dominant group to recognize that people “in the minority position have a higher embarrassment factor due to their status.”¹¹⁹ One should never exploit faults and always protect dignity. Is this fair? Anderson distinguishes gracism from favoritism or partiality that James condemns by giving special consideration to those without a voice.¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 77.

¹¹⁸ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 24.

¹¹⁹ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 70.

¹²⁰ “Distinct from favoritism, whereby one is granted favor because of a special status, ethnic superiority or commonality, gracism reaches outside the box of elitism and special favors based on some fraternal code or secret handshake. Favor is showering extra grace on a few while having love for all. Favoritism is purposefully neglecting the needs of the many to accommodate the greeds of a few. While favor is the art of inclusion, favoritism is the exercise of exclusion. Christianity is an inclusive faith that bids all to come.” Anderson, *Gracism*, 24.

Prayer Energizes God's Reign in the Church

What role does spirituality play in the life of the MEC? In short, it “sustains and energizes the multiethnic church” because “contemplation and effective missions are inseparable.”¹²¹ Given her dependence upon divine resources, the MEC must become a house of prayer. The Lord’s Prayer provides pastors with the assurance that their congregation is centered in God’s will. Ortiz writes, “Jesus gives us the prayer to pray—thy kingdom come here on earth as it is in heaven—and when we take a look at heaven, we see how God is uniting all people to himself and to each other, and that really is the picture we’re trying to pursue here on earth.”¹²² Prayer represents the MEC pastor’s commitment to spiritual formation, says Ortiz. These pastors rely heavily on prayer and fasting and introduce well-organized prayer ministries in their congregations simply because they are aware that the unique challenges of ministering in a multiethnic milieu is the work of the Lord God.¹²³

Retroactive Eschatology

The MEC provides a foretaste of a future heavenly community. The light at the end of the tunnel cannot help but reflect its rays back into it. The MEC’s vision of the heavenly Jerusalem shapes its community life in light of that future day. Ortiz believes Revelation 5:13 calls us now to “start thinking anticipatorily as we discern the signs of the future so that we can minister joyfully, not defensively.”¹²⁴ Rhodes calls the MEC a “home-going people.” Believing we are living in the last days, the MEC embodies in the

¹²¹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 147.

¹²² Ortiz, *One New People*, 54.

¹²³ Ortiz, *One New People*, 115-6.

¹²⁴ Ortiz, *One New People*, 148.

present what the church will be in its future glory. For Anderson, today's MEC conforms to the heavenly body of the redeemed. Jesus' model prayer that God's will "be done on earth as in heaven" points to the demographic composition of heaven in Revelation 5:9-10, 12; 7:9: "The population of the redeemed in heaven are racially, ethnically and nationally diverse."¹²⁵

Rhodes especially develops the eschatological theme. Using Revelation 7:9-12, he ties all the separate themes of his work to their culmination. Immigrants in this world who long for a "better country" (Heb 11:6, 16) will find their rest. Because we are one day nearer (Rom 13:11-12) to our eternal home in the heavens (2 Cor 5:1), and we are not strangers and aliens in this new family (Eph 2:19), the multiethnic church becomes a "foretaste of the final kingdom."

Yet the MEC stands soberly and acutely aware that its final arrival is yet to come. The MEC lives in tension between the "already" and the "not yet," present reality and future expectation of the kingdom of God. Charles Van Engen correctly stresses that "The Church is not the kingdom in its fullness, but as the anticipatory sign Christians live in anxious waiting and suspenseful hope."¹²⁶ Multicultural congregations are not God's kingdom come on earth, but the foretaste of that kingdom...[These congregations] "make the kingdom visible." It is here that the MEC towers above the racially homogeneous congregation. By its very demographic makeup the HUP cannot signal this future. By contrast, the MEC, even more than stationary signs, are "eschatological heralds of that which is coming."¹²⁷ Walls describes the end of the age as:

¹²⁵ Anderson, *Gracism*, 106.

¹²⁶ Charles Van Engen, *God's Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1991), 110; quoted by Rhodes, *Nations*, 77.

¹²⁷ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 223.

a “summary,” the completion when all the generations of God’s people are gathered together, the completion of the process of summing up. The multicultural church is the present “completing” of Christ’s body (Eph 1:19-23). The body of Christ is “space” , including races such as Jews and Gentiles, and “times” referring to various manifestations across time. This so that the body is “different social realities at a single point in time”¹²⁸

Paul’s “full stature of Christ,” a goal to which I have seen applied to the addition of new converts to a single congregation, is more likely to be entire cultures of people finding themselves grafted into an every-growing body.

The Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) Examined

Donald McGavran (1897-1990) launched what would become the Church Growth Movement (CGM) that for decades has advocated the proclamation of the gospel and planting homogenous congregations in the interest in advancing the great commission. Any church leaders advocating the multicultural congregation must carefully consider this homogenous unit principle. Before hearing how proponents of multicultural churches appraise it, let us examine how it was originally conceived.

Church Expanded: HUP Envisioned by the Church Growth Movement

The Church Growth movement, rising amidst plateauing church membership, sought to account for the lack of growth in the midst of receptivity.¹²⁹ The central question from which McGavran never wavered was, “How do Peoples become Christian?”¹³⁰ The answer was to focus energies on what he deemed the most important

¹²⁸ Walls, *Cross-Cultural Process*, 74.

¹²⁹ Donald McGavran, *Bridges of God*, 92, 25-26.

¹³⁰ McGavran, *Bridges*, 1.

single endeavors: preaching the gospel and planting homogenous churches.¹³¹ Out of that paramount challenge he premised the HUP on a few core fundamentals.

The HUP Acknowledges a Sociological Reality

First, the homogenous unit represents demographic reality rather than theological dogma. He observed how society arranges itself as a “mosaic” of adjoining “people groups” in which each piece contains a “society whose members marry exclusively within it...Its intimate life will be restricted to itself. Clan loyalty or people loyalty will be the highest virtue,”¹³² noting that:

Every nation is made up of various layers or strata of society. In many nations each stratum is clearly separated from every other. The individuals in each stratum intermarry chiefly, if not solely, with each other. Their intimate life is therefore limited to their own society, that is, to their own people. They may work with others, they may buy from and sell to the individuals of other societies, but their intimate life is wrapped up with the individuals of their own people.¹³³

McGavran emphasizes the obvious¹³⁴ without affirming nor denying its theological ramifications. He recognizes that “human beings are born into thousands of very different societies, separated from each other by many barriers.”¹³⁵

The HUP Utilizes Social Norms for Evangelistic Advantage

Building on that indisputable societal fact, McGavran prescribes an evangelistic strategy that introduces the gospel into one ethnic “piece” at a time. He drew lessons from J. Watson Pickett who reported extraordinary numerical success in the villages of

¹³¹ McGavran, *Bridges*, 283-4.

¹³² Donald McGavran, J. W. Pickett, G. H. Singh and A. L. Wamshuis, *Church Growth and Group Conversion*. (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1973 (5th ed.), 1936), 6.

¹³³ McGavran, *Bridges*, 1.

¹³⁴ “This principle states an undeniable fact. Human beings do build barriers around their own societies...the world’s population is a mosaic, and each piece has a separate life of its own that seems strange and often unlovely to men and women of other pieces.” McGavran, *Bridges*, 163.

¹³⁵ McGavran, *Bridges*, 163.

India.¹³⁶ Its effectiveness was explained in terms of the “familiarity factor” in which human persuasion is heightened by social closeness. “The people most likely to be influenced by a man’s attitude on religion are his fellow castemen, especially his relatives and members of his local group.”¹³⁷ Robust growth comes when it follows this pattern. He writes, “Church growth has almost always been caste-wise. When the Church has made its greatest strides, individuals became Christian with their fellow tribesmen, with their kindred and with their people.”¹³⁸ The HUP utilizes these natural dynamics for missional ends, turning existing social pathways into “bridges of God” on which the gospel circulates freely with the fewest obstacles. How is this so? His famous answer became axiomatic for the CGM: “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic, or class barriers.”¹³⁹ In contrast to the swiftness of ethnically similar evangelistic witness, McGavran observes, are congregations that trudge along by prioritizing “brotherhood” over bringing salvation.

To many Christians, the establishment of brotherhood among the races is the supreme goal of the church. They are opposed to segregation in any form. They doubt the validity of any principle that encourages Christians of one class or race to worship together or form congregations for their particular kind of people only. It is better, they think, to have a slow growing or non-growing church that is really brotherly, integrated, and hence quote “really Christian,” than a rapidly growing one-people church.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁶ Pickett wrote, “... in every province of British India and in many Indian states large numbers profess adherence to the Christian religion because of movements that developed within a group to which they, or one of their ancestors, belonged.” J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India*, (Cincinnati, OH: Abingdon Press, 1933), 21. For the significant numerical gains of the People Movement, see 5.

¹³⁷ Pickett, *Mass Movements*, 26.

¹³⁸ Pickett. Later, McGavran wisely cautioned against the tendency to “deify principle” or dogmatize the work of God into a hard and fast template. See Donald McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 214.

¹³⁹ McGavran, *Bridges*, 156.

¹⁴⁰ McGavran, *Bridges*, 208-09.

McGavran distinguishes the noble goal of “brotherhood” from the grand goal of evangelism. His experience teaches him that most who object to receiving the Christian faith do so for sociological rather than theological reasons. These sociological deterrents to mission are “lions” standing in the path of progress.¹⁴¹

The HUP Anticipates Successive Reconciliation

Third, spreading the gospel message takes precedence over building cross-cultural friendships and racial reconciliation. Why is this so? McGavran defends this priority or sequence along two lines. First, he draws from the experiences of Peter and Paul in what he calls “the Pentecostal pattern.” Peter began, not with attempts to blend separate cultures together, but with the gospel: “We hesitate to think what might have happened, if ... Peter had required as a first step in following Christ, a willingness to dine with pig-eating Gentiles but he did no such thing. Jews could become Christians with no consciousness of traitorously abandoning their people.”¹⁴² And Paul mapped his way through the nations by the Spirit over relational bridges: “How then did Paul choose fields of labor? To be accurate we must say that he did not choose fields. He followed up groups of people who had living relations in the People Movement to Christ.”¹⁴³

McGavran argues that reconciliation between human beings and ethnic groups follows spiritual reconciliation with God. In countering criticisms from the West that charge him with racial insensitivity, he counters by insisting that his approach does not negate the gospel of “brotherly” reconciliation, but delays it until after spiritual reconciliation has occurred. Until unconverted people experience the new birth, racial reconciliation

¹⁴¹ McGavran, *Bridges*, 239.

¹⁴² Donald McGavran, J. W. Pickett, G. H. Singh and A. L. Warnshuis, *Church Growth and Group Conversion* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 5 ed., 1936, 1973), 98.

¹⁴³ McGavran, *Bridges*, 31.

remains untenable. Do racially homogenous congregations promote racial reconciliation? McGavran argues affirmatively, believing the power of the gospel to strike racism from the human soul. This confidence establishes a sequential cause and effect motion of divine grace. God reconciles the racist to himself who is changed and becomes a new creature.¹⁴⁴ Second, once reconciled to God, believers possess an overflowing reservoir of grace from which to draw and become peacemakers. "I cannot ally myself ... with those who put social action first. On the contrary, my conviction is that the salvation granted to those who believe on Jesus Christ is still the supreme need of human beings, and all other human good flows from that prior reconciliation to God."¹⁴⁵

How can a homogenous congregation find support with texts such as Ephesians 2:14-15? That text, says McGavran, describes the nature of the church that follows the work of evangelism.

Christ is indeed "our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of division between us..." But it must be noted that Jesus creates one new man in place of the two "*in himself*." Jews and Gentiles – or other classes and races who scorn and hate one another – must be brought to Christ before they can be made really one.¹⁴⁶

Christians must distinguish between the "fruit and the root." Of all the tasks given to the church, the eternal one is paramount: For "three billion who have never heard the name of Christ [the main task is] to flood them with the knowledge of their Savior."¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁴ "Part of that battle...is to lead non-Christians to Christ. Simply becoming Christian is the greatest possible step toward brotherhood [racial justice] that most people can take...The Christian in whose heart Christ dwells inclines toward brotherhood as water runs down a valley...If Christ in the heart did not impel toward brotherhood, no amount of social action would help the situation. The church's real business is the proclamation of the gospel. Her real business is also to obey her Lord's command to love one another..." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 174.

¹⁴⁵ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 174.

¹⁴⁶ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 175.

¹⁴⁷ McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 31.

By reversing that order and placing racial reconciliation at the top of the church's agenda, chances for success become squelched by severing the spiritual supply-line that could make racial reconciliation possible. Why, McGavran might ask, would a black person set foot in a white church if he has yet to first experience forgiving grace?

McGavran clearly supported racial equality,¹⁴⁸ fully anticipating ethnocentricity to be confronted and resolved through discipling efforts occurring in an integrated body subsequently to conversion.

The HUP will Become an MEC

What, then, if the gospel runs swiftly through pathways that are familial, familiar and homogenous, is the nature of the church? Surprisingly, McGavran advocates a MEC ecclesiology of heterogeneity rather than the HUP! He writes, "converts from different peoples were now one new creation in Christ Jesus. The remaining walls of partition were gradually broken down."¹⁴⁹ But how can this be? The church will eventually conform to its true inclusive nature. A church in its infancy then will not look the same as

¹⁴⁸ McGavran writes, "...dark-skinned Christians in Afericasia, revolting against white imperialism, add a powerful voice to this demand that the American Church in no way countenance discrimination against dark-skinned citizens. In such a time as this the Church must become afresh the tangible living embodiment of the Gospel of reconciliation in its own fellowship and demonstrate to the world with unmistakable clarity its unequivocal stand on the side of freedom from discrimination, injustice, and intolerance of any kind, whether racial, cultural, or national. [quoted from a letter from a church in India in 1963 to a sister denomination in USA]. One must, of course, cordially endorse these sentiments. The principle I am setting forth, which plays such a large part in the growth of the Church on new ground, should not be understood as condoning white race pride...My own considered opinion is that, in the United States, the refusal of any congregation to admit Negroes as members is sin. The Church, I hold, is rightly engaged in a great battle for brotherhood against all such non-Christian behavior. In the battle, she is ranged on God's side. McGavran, *Bridges*, 121-22.

"Part of that battle, however, is to lead non-Christians to Christ. Simply becoming Christian is the greatest step toward brotherhood which it is possible for most people in Afericasia to take. All nations have their classes. Human pride encourages the formation of exclusive groupings. Many religions encourage their adherents to feel that they alone are the superior people...When men become Christians they adopt a faith which teaches the fatherhood of God and the universal brotherhood of man...If class distinctions continue, they do so in spite of the Christian faith, not because of it. Brotherhood is part of the basic theology of the Christian Church. The Christian in whose heart Christ dwells inclines toward brotherhood as water runs down a valley. If Christ in the heart did not impel toward brotherhood, no amount of social action would help the situation. The Church's real business is the proclamation of the Gospel. Her real business is also to obey her Lord's command to love one another." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 208 – 10.

¹⁴⁹ McGavran, *Bridges*, 37.

it will in its maturity. McGavran believes that “People Movements do not mean Churches permanently divided by caste-consciousness. They start keenly conscious of their racial heritage. They must start that way. In peoples without Christ, full of natural pride and caste-consciousness, how else could they start?”¹⁵⁰ But, as Christ rules in the hearts of His disciples and the effulgence of His glory fills His Churches, racial divisions are destroyed and peoples are unified. “For He is our peace, who made both one and broke down the middle wall of partition.”¹⁵¹ I find it difficult to dispute with McGavran’s logic here as it pertains to this chronological sequence. Yet it begs the question. Why has evangelicalism in North America witnessed just the opposite? Its “mature” stage hardly reflects the multiethnic church anticipated by McGavran. Something has derailed it from reaching its second stage. What is it?

The HUP Bifurcates Concrete Ecclesiology

Despite McGavran’s intended vision to see MECs emerge from homogenous church plants, that by and large has failed to materialize. The reason for this seems twofold. First, in the early Church Growth Movement (CGM), I found an expectation but not a plan of inclusion. How will ethnic diversity emerge from a monocultural church? Second, the latter CGM actually promoted segregated congregations of “our kind” as the ideal. What McGavran envisioned as a transitional stage, his American counterparts made permanent reality. McGavran had declared that various ethnic people groups that were previously thought incompatible would converge at the Cross and, in time, through the Spirit worship one Father together. A compelling plan to transition a one-people congregation into an MEC, however, is not apparent in McGavran and, in Peter Wagner

¹⁵⁰ McGavran, *Bridges*, 37.

¹⁵¹ McGavran, *Bridges*, 37.

not even desirable. For Wagner, who popularized the HUP in the USA, a racially integrated congregation was to be considered an impediment! A prominent sign of a “healthy, growing church is that its membership is composed of basically one kind of people. Even in church, ‘birds of a feather flock together.’” Wagner defines the “homogenous unit” as “simply a group of people who consider each other to be ‘our kind of people.’ They have many areas of mutual interest. They share the same culture. They socialize freely. When they are together they are comfortable and they all feel at home.”¹⁵² He recalls McGavran, who said, “People like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers.” Now he takes his mentor one critical step further by equating “becoming a Christian” with “going to church.” Wagner, like McGavran, exonerates himself from personal racist charges,¹⁵³ yet the ecclesiology he advanced, unlike his mentor, failed to mitigate interethnic conflicts between groups even within Christianity. In 1979 he cited support for the HUP from missionaries serving in central Africa. He wrote, “In Burundi, for example, Christian Tutsis have little problem in understanding why Hutus prefer their own kind of local church with their own leadership...”¹⁵⁴ This is not to lay responsibility at his feet yet one can only wonder the degree to which the devastating suffering might have been fended off in the early 1990’s had Christian Tutsis and Hutus taken the more difficult path of forming MECs in the late 1970’s.

Returning to the question, then, of what has derailed the sequence of reconciliation, it seems that later generations transformed McGavran’s missiological strategy into an ecclesiological model. The HUP has become the standard, Ecclesiology

¹⁵² Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books, 1976), 110.

¹⁵³ See, for example, Wagner, *Grow*, 113-16.

¹⁵⁴ Wagner, *Grow*, 111.

101, fixed practice, and thus reconciliation in its tragically truncated form. It simply failed to reach the finish line that McGavran had envisioned. The fact of society became the fact of the church. Its HUP mosaic was overlaid on congregations and thus replaced the inclusive community that God desired.

CHURCH IMPERILED – HUP Appraised by MEC Defenders

How do those who champion the cause of the MEC understand and appraise the HUP especially as it squares with the gospel, facilitates Christ's great commission and fosters racial relations? They believe it imperils the church in five chief ways.

Peril of Division: The HUP Promotes Ethnic Segregation

Is the HUP an instrument of racism? To Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein it is one of many forms of racial prejudice in American Christianity in which the "white segment of the church has allowed itself to become a co-conspirator with the enemy."¹⁵⁵ The homogenous church-growth principle provides false justification for segregating believers racially and socially.

In principle, Peart concurs with McGavran's sequence of reconciliation, initially personal and subsequently interpersonal, recognizing that "God has used spiritual reconciliation to cancel ethnic and other social divisions."¹⁵⁶ Yet he takes issue with the CGM premise that efforts at racial reconciliation pose as a "rival to evangelism and discipleship."¹⁵⁷ Where McGavran denies that the HUP contributes to racist churches, Ortiz disagrees:

¹⁵⁵ Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 109.

¹⁵⁶ Peart, *Separate No More*, 109. For his full discussion on racial stereotypes, see 173-6.

¹⁵⁷ Peart, *Separate No More*, 105.

I believe HUP has been a hindrance to race relations and to racial and ethnic reconciliation in the Christian community. At this time we, the church in the U.S., are a great disappointment in terms of manifesting the new community found in Christ Jesus and called to worship the King of the kingdom in the ministry of reconciliation.¹⁵⁸

Tom Nees avoids linking the HUP to the blatant racism in early Christian America which he deems abhorrent.¹⁵⁹ Instead, he places it against its time period immediately following the civil rights era. He cites Bill Sullivan, the 1992 president of the American Society of Church Growth and the 1993 recipient of the society's Donald McGavran Award and who was mentored by McGavran. Sullivan exonerated him of racist charges while acknowledging that the HUP was "intended to affirm the legitimacy of all those groups and simply get evangelism in line. Even McGavran himself was highly supportive of the Civil Rights Movement."¹⁶⁰ Inclusiveness, Nees says, as a gospel mandate is "undebatable" and "the inclusive gospel can hardly be proclaimed from an exclusive church."¹⁶¹

Peril of Consumerism: The HUP Equates Comfort with Divine Blessing

From their urban context, Kehrein and Washington view the HUP as the "seduction of the age to equate our comfort level with God's blessings" making a false correspondence between being blessed with feeling blessed. Genuine blessing is seen and God's power is proven when "dissimilar factions" are brought together in peace, drawing upon Ephesians 2:14-16.¹⁶²

¹⁵⁸ Ortiz, *One New People*, 45.

¹⁵⁹ "Racial divisions have been the scandal of American Christianity...Segregated congregations were the result of philosophies of white supremacy and exclusion." Nees, *Changing Face*, 65.

¹⁶⁰ Quoted in Nees, *Changing Face*, 62.

¹⁶¹ Nees, *Changing Face*, 64.

¹⁶² Nees, *Changing Face*, 180.

The HUP compromises the principle of personal sacrifice that is required for any mission work,¹⁶³ says DeYoung. Evangelicals have replaced Christ's costly demands of discipleship with the American creed that endows citizens with "rights and freedoms and that there should be liberty and justice for all."¹⁶⁴ The Declaration of Independence, he observes, carries more weight with many American Christians than the explicit commands of Christ. Emerson and Smith echo these sentiments, contending that the HUP encourages religious groups to "cater to people's existing preferences, rather than their ideal callings."¹⁶⁵ They suggest that religion is to American Christians what a good bargain is to a shopper. Have we become a people in search of churches positioned to offer us maximum benefit at the lowest cost? They answer with a parable of indictment:

Thus, if they can go to either the Church of Meaning and Belonging, or the Church of Sacrifice for Meaning and Belonging, most people choose the former. It provides benefit for less cost. Prophetic voices calling for the end of group division and inequality, to the extent that this requires sacrifice or threatens group cohesion, are perfectly free to exist, but they are ghettoized. They will have followers, but they will be a minority voice.¹⁶⁶

It is obvious that the root problem is not with McGavran per se, but the underlying principle of the "market" which is at the core of the whole church growth movement. Church growth is articulated within the framework of sociological, not biblical, categories. This association invariably brings a demeaning effect as we shall see next.

¹⁶³ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 187.

¹⁶⁴ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 4.

¹⁶⁵ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 164.

¹⁶⁶ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 164.

Peril of Stereotyping: The HUP Devalues People Groups

Monocultural churches often find themselves led by pastors who feel passionate about reaching their own kind and retaining their culture.¹⁶⁷ Many of these, including both people of color and whites, often lead in ways that are fed by fear and anxiety because, finding themselves isolated from other groups in our segregated society, they form myths and labels that lack accurate information. Many rank different ethnic groups on a sliding scale of inferiority to superiority and view others as violent.¹⁶⁸

Emerson and Smith examined extensive data in an attempt to discover reasons for America's segregation. Is the HUP congregation to blame? Partly. Interestingly, they dismiss white prejudice as a plausible cause¹⁶⁹ and, instead, point to "the organization of American religion [that] powerfully drives religious groups toward internal similarity."¹⁷⁰ In their view, religion does not alter in any appreciable way the human tendency that if left to personal choice, people will invariably opt to be close to others who are like themselves. The "overwhelming push toward internal homogeneity" arises from the "autonomous individual" resulting in the formation of racially segregated congregations.

American churches are like stores located in a mall, they say, each competing with the other for "customers" in this "religious marketplace" of a vast array of religious options. While the HUP is but one piece contributing to this autonomy, it is significant. Combined with other forces at play in American religion, namely influences of the Enlightenment upon America's founding fathers and revivalism, these spawned

¹⁶⁷ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 109.

¹⁶⁸ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 121.

¹⁶⁹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 151. Thus they later conclude "merely eliminating racial prejudice would not end racially divided churches."

¹⁷⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 151.

“disestablishment, pluralism, competition, and consumer choice.”¹⁷¹ Competing groups perpetuate ignorance that, in turn, cannot help but breed false characterizations among groups within the human family.

Peril of the Archipelago: The HUP Multiplies Islands of Independence

The authors criticize the HUP for creating independence rather than interdependence in the Body of Christ. Washington recognizes that natural affinities among cultural groups does not constitute racism, recognizing that “most Georgia farmers would feel quite out of place in a highbrow Episcopal service...” But that human tendency translates into a “separate but equal” principle for the body of Christ with little to offer a racially torn society. Instead it portrays the church as one more collection of disconnected and independent parts. “Interdependence” on the other hand, “demonstrates the transforming nature of the gospel and declares that we do need each other if we are to live out the ministry of reconciliation.”¹⁷²

Peril of Passivity: The HUP Voices Inclusion but Practices Exclusion

The HUP allows evangelicals to pay lip-service to racial reconciliation without investing the time, energy and resources to advance it. This particular peril is considered to be the most insidious of all and takes the greatest toll on the much needed prophetic voice that the church ought to have. When Christians assent to truth without submitting to it society loses. It comes up short by being forfeited the gospel’s transforming power that the church failed to deliver. Joseph Henriques criticizes the HUP as a “nod to agreement of truth rather than a way of life”¹⁷³ and Washington as the “passive

¹⁷¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 151.

¹⁷² Kehrein and Washington, *Breaking Down Walls*, 170.

¹⁷³ Henriques and Pocock, *Cultural Change*, 99.

acceptance of a theological truth.” Rhodes equates this inactivity with resistance to God. While professing the church’s unity, they justify continuing to practice their HUP with something like the MEC is “a ‘wonderful concept’ but certainly not practical.” The HUP springs from fear, a tactic of survival for denominations faced with numerical decline that result from the confusion between the felt priorities of the worshiper and the revealed priorities of God.¹⁷⁴ It stands as a modern Tower of Babel project, he says, demonstrating arrogant defiance against God. In the first instance, the citizens of Shinar defied God’s mandate to spread out by gathering in. The HUP is the same disease, just in a reverse direction.¹⁷⁵ Thus, the reigning paradigm of the HUP is past and must be abandoned as human folly.¹⁷⁶ He discarded it partly because of the way in which the Spirit brought members into his church who he would never have thought to “fit” his congregation, learning to leave “correct profiling” to God.¹⁷⁷ As pastor he expects his non-white staff pastors to “serve the whole congregation” cross-culturally.¹⁷⁸ Nees concurs that passivity results in the church’s loss of its prophetic voice in matters of racial reconciliation. He issues a call for those in his denomination to realign practice with its theological claim. His concern arises from the contradiction between the optimism conveyed in Wesleyan-holiness theology of grace— offering a cleansing that

¹⁷⁴ Rhodes, *Nations*, 76.

¹⁷⁵ Rhodes, *Nations*, 26-27, 76. He adds, “If we follow the logic of the church growth specialist, then we also need churches of only Democrats or Republicans, rich or poor, suburbanites or city dwellers, sports enthusiasts or fine arts lovers, computer nerds or nature lovers, fans of westerns or science fiction. No church can create a culture in which one is totally comfortable.”

¹⁷⁶ Rhodes, *Nations*, 222. “We are living in the last days of the idolatry of success, in which Christians bow before the false god of homogeneous church growth instead of throwing the church doors wide open to all God’s children.” Rhodes, *Nations*, 222.

¹⁷⁷ “There will be no ‘Culmore Calvins’ to join the ‘Saddleback Sams’ or the ‘Willowbank Unchurched Harrys or Marys’ of the church-growth methodology for profiling potential members. All that we can do is welcome each man and woman ...” Rhodes, *Nations*, 97.

¹⁷⁸ Rhodes, *Nations*, 105.

runs deep and an inclusion that runs wide — with the inexplicable delay in mitigating the sin of racism. Yet the failure to square practice with claims, the church forfeits moral authority.¹⁷⁹

The glaring disconnect between creed and deed received its most severe reproof by Emerson and Smith. They concluded that the HUP in America is one indicator that the evangelical church merely mirrors societal norms rather than shapes them.¹⁸⁰

Resolving racial relations requires no sacrifice on the part of white Christians, neither in terms of financial outlay or in cultural adjustment. Such changes they avoid because it would be “costly.”¹⁸¹ The HUP merely lengthens the shadow of Jim Crow in the way that its advocates:

prescribed kindness toward people of other races and getting to know people across races, but did not challenge the Jim Crow system, present-day evangelicals attempt to solve the race problem without shaking the foundations on which racialization is built. As long as they do not see or acknowledge the structures or racialization, they inadvertently contribute to them.¹⁸²

These summarize the authors’ objections to the HUP as a general concept as they envision it.¹⁸³

¹⁷⁹ “The church cannot be true to its own vision of an international fellowship by dividing into a maze of subcultures, telling people, ‘If you look like this, or talk like that, we have a place for you.’” Rhodes, *Nations*, 56.

¹⁸⁰ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 130.

¹⁸¹ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 130. “Given their aversion to discomfort (a universal human trait) and cultural tools, they offer ‘Christian’ solutions such as asking forgiveness, converting people to Christ, and forming cross-race friendships.”

¹⁸² Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 132.

¹⁸³ Analysis of the HUP in an article by Rene Padilla, while outside the selections of this review, merit a summary and is included in Appendix 7.

The HUP – What Shall We Then Say?

Comparing the HUP as first articulated by McGavran with the assessments of MEC proponents thirty years later reveals considerable dissonance. Most of these view the HUP as an accomplice of racism that splits congregations into ethnically defined islands with minimum interdependence. They follow the dictates of personal preference over obedience to Scripture, and, worst of all, has driven a wedge between creed and deed in such a way that spawns widespread passivity among the white church by restricting responsibility for racial integration to the few.

The problem I have with the HUP is its diminished place for ecclesiology. Its defenders have turned a missional strategy into an ecclesiological reality. Therein lies the trouble. Upon closer reading, the HUP, if assigned to an ecclesiological category will alter or distort its original meaning. For McGavran it pertained to adapting evangelist strategies to sociological realities. People want to “come to Christ” without crossing cultural barriers. His critics seem unanimously to turn it into something different, transforming it into an ecclesiological model. DeYoung is typical: “McGavran...argued that most people do not want to cross the lines of race or culture to go to church.”¹⁸⁴ Perhaps the HUP later devolved into church preference, but that reflects more on the condition of the later church rather than the original intention of its author.

As we lay the HUP to rest, what can we say? Perhaps it was a product of McGavran’s background. That is, he was raised not in a context of the individualistic West but on the Indian continent where caste is an ingrained social force. At times he spoke of the MEC in taboo terms, echoing Hinduism’s Vedantic literature that ordains and promotes a society that is structured by the most stringent HUP, warning individuals

¹⁸⁴ DeYoung et al., *United by Faith*, 130.

against stepping out of their preordained assigned tasks or intimate relationships of severe penalties awaiting them in their next life. His context may have contributed to the shape of his position, turning regional taboo into broad principle.¹⁸⁵ To what degree the caste system fashioned the HUP we cannot know. We do know that this principle that was applied in the U.S.A. originated outside of it.

Perhaps the HUP was a product of McGavran's time. He actually commended the MEC hypothetically if certain conditions were present and saw it as an end state.¹⁸⁶ Interestingly, that sociological constellation of factors aptly describes much of American culture in the twenty-first century.

Finally, this leads to the question of its legacy. Does the HUP have valid sustained usefulness? First, the HUP can be beneficial when applied narrowly to some cases. It can offer respite to first-generation immigrants transitioning to the American way of life. When applied as a broad principle, however, it offers only palliative solutions to racism, relieving and soothing its symptoms without effecting a cure. Insulin, when administered to a diabetic patient can save a life, but if administered to a healthy person will prove lethal. Ethnic segregation is a path of lethal convenience, failing to apply the full gospel of reconciliation to those who society easily discards. That should unsettle any evangelical. An archipelago might be acceptable if congregational islands were created equal, each a self-sufficient paradise. What is troubling here is that Maui and Alcatraz both qualify as islands, yet offer vastly different amenities! Even though

¹⁸⁵ See "The Hymn of Man" (*Purusa-Sukta*) in Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (tr.), *The Rig Veda: An Anthology* (NY: Penguin Books, 1981), 29-32. Our present interest notes specifically the way in which these partition society into defined levels in Hindu sacred duty (*dharma*). In the Gita, that duty refers generally to "religiously ordained duty" and means "the rules of conduct appropriate to the various diverse groups in a hierarchically ordered society, articulated in terms of class, stage of life and kinship structure." Barbara Stoler Miller (tr.), *The Bhagavad-Gita* (NY:NY: Bantam Books, 1986), 164. According to the Gita, since the caste was created by Lord Krishna, inter-mixing them incurs dire consequences. See the commentary of Swami Nikhilananda, *The Bhagavad Gita* (NY:Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1952), 65 (cf.129).

¹⁸⁶ See his comments on "the urban exception." McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth*, 214-15.

unintended, the HUP ignores severe social inequities and reinforces grueling isolation. This state of affairs also robs the reconciling gospel of coming to concrete fruition issuing in joint celebration. The HUP in a pluralist society caters more to the comforts of the dominant group rather than alleviating challenges facing minorities. It kneels indefensibly at the altar of pragmatic success while ignoring the call of weightier matters of justice, mercy and kindness.

Does the “homogenous unit principle” have value in Christ’s kingdom? Indeed, as a concept the HUP remains neutral until becoming either tarnished or justified by its defining adjective. For example, the Holy Club of the Wesley brothers qualified as an HUP in how it restricted its members to those who voluntarily covenanted themselves to a regimen of spiritual disciplines. Tom Nees, for example, commended the HUP in a way that reinforces the MEC: “A culturally diverse congregation is a homogenous unit in its own way, with its commitment to diversity being the glue that holds the people together.”¹⁸⁷ That accurately reflects GRIF’s original and continuing self-image as a people who commit themselves to an ethnically diverse community in Christ as a living testimony to God’s kingdom in Grand Rapids. Key for us is not the neutral sociological noun, but its defining theological adjective.

One glimmer of hope peeked through the pessimistic clouds of *Divided by Faith*. Maybe the MEC is on the right path, for “if white evangelicals were less racially isolated, they might assess race problems differently and, working in unison with others, apply their evangelical vigor to broader-based solutions.”¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ Nees, *Changing Face*, 63.

¹⁸⁸ Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 132.

Congregational Models for the Multiethnic Church

What congregational models best reflect the church's nature and advance its mission as set forth by its Lord? What should such an MEC look like? Answers will not nor should not come quickly, the authors suggest. "Not all multiracial churches are alike"¹⁸⁹ notes Yancey. The literature identifies various MEC models, overlapping but with distinct themes. I would call these models of origination (Yancey), of cultural pluralism (Henriques), of reconciliation (Peart), and of facilitation (Ortiz). These, as repeatedly pointed out, are not mutually exclusive.

Models of Origination

Yancey discovered that the way churches begin their multiethnic efforts will likely determine their permanent shape.¹⁹⁰ Thus leaders will do well to think through and match the model or type of church to the particular mission or to organize against racism or injustice. He found four distinct types of MECs currently being used in his Lilly research. First, "leadership" churches emerge from the skills of leaders in the congregation or the pastor and typically churches that emphasize charismatic gifts and utilize different styles of music. Second, the "evangelism" model places priority on bringing people to Christ regardless of ethnicity which happens to produce a MEC. Third, "demographic" models arise because the population changes in the church's surrounding neighborhood call congregations to transition and resist "white flight." Next is the "network" model that grows out of expansion of social networks within the congregation, likely to have socially diverse social ties develop through "interracial marriages, multiracial friendships or integrated social settings."

¹⁸⁹ Yancey, *One Body*, 51.

¹⁹⁰ Yancey, *One Body*, 51-2.

Of the four, Yancey commends the network MEC as most likely to grow and for its two distinguishing features. It “is more likely to develop a multiracial institutional identity” which means that “a church cannot focus on the perspective of one racial culture and ignore the perspective of other racial groups.”¹⁹¹ Second, it fosters interracial friendships between members. This indicates that “individuals of different races can learn about each other in a more intimate manner. Such friendships can make it more difficult for racial stereotypes and animosity to develop” and “may provide a more harmonious racial atmosphere than the other types.”¹⁹²

Models of Cultural Pluralism

Henriques helps churches think through ways to construct themselves in immigrant-friendly or minority-welcoming ways.¹⁹³ What kind of models will help ethnic newcomers integrate into a church? He summarizes six basic types: “dominant-culture” that views immigrants as “not really part of us,” the “multicongregation” that shares one facility with varying levels of interaction between the congregations, “interethnic church celebration” in which “ethnic churches are separate entities that periodically engage in interethnic fellowship experiences,” the “ethnic-specific” churches which “value their cultural integrity and choose to avoid interaction with other culture groups,” the “dominant-culture church with a multicultural fellowship” as a monocultural church that takes on the needs of a specific group of immigrants,¹⁹⁴ and the “multicultural” church in which its leadership intentionally creates a heterogeneous congregation at all levels of

¹⁹¹ Yancey, *One Body*, 60.

¹⁹² Yancey, *One Body*, 60.

¹⁹³ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 134.

¹⁹⁴ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 134. For an extensive list of ministry opportunities, see 136.

the church as reflected in the stated vision and philosophy statements, goals and strategic plans.

While some churches consider themselves to represent the last model because they have some minorities present, the author rightly stresses that for a church to truly fit here, it must meet “qualitative and quantitative measures.” To meet the quantitative criterion, it must have a significant percentage of various ethnic groups (as opposed to a biracial church). That percentage is usually not a hard and fast number but more than a “smattering.”¹⁹⁵ Henriques does not specify a percentage but Yancey sets the minimum standard that 20 percent of the total must be racially different than the dominant.¹⁹⁶ The quantitative measurement alone is not sufficient. The qualitative standard is “the equal distribution of majority and minority leadership throughout the church and the ethnic diversity of its music programs, its teaching styles, and its application of Scripture.”¹⁹⁷

Models of Reconciliation

Peart correctly insists that no model of the church can produce reconciliation. That achievement is “a working of the Holy Spirit and not the result of carefully crafted strategies or plans.”¹⁹⁸ Yet he recognizes their value and locates five models on a “Reconciliation Continuum” from the least to the most likely for a church to realize the interracial unity that Christ has graciously provided. Starting at the end that is least likely to succeed is the “segregation model” which neither wants nor admits individuals from minority groups. Next comes the “differentiation model” which is ethnic specific, aiming

¹⁹⁵ See Ortiz, *One New People*, 88.

¹⁹⁶ Yancey, *One Body*, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 140.

¹⁹⁸ Peart, *Separate No More*, 17.

to preserve its cultural identity and intentionally avoids attracting those from other groups. This is followed by the “assimilation model” that welcomes other ethnic groups but does not change in order to accommodate them. It represents a “sameness, not oneness” philosophy. Still better is the “intentional but irrational model” that purposefully reaches out to minorities but “suppresses differences for the sake of unity.” Finally and best he proposes the “InHIMtegration Model” that “accepts manifest racial differences yet at the same time magnifies oneness in Christ.”¹⁹⁹ What commends this last model to me is the way Peart draws it directly from critical texts in Ephesians 2:13-16 (reconciliation), Ephesians 4:22-24 (new humanity) and Acts 15 (separating cultures from essential gospel).

Models of Facilitation

Manuel Ortiz believes that a model should “echo New Testament diversity of cultures, social class, shared ministry and leadership” and “make visible God’s work in the world.”²⁰⁰ He teaches that whatever the model a church develops, it should arise after exegeting their community and the Word. Sociology must merge with theology and furnishes effective examples by those who have done it well.²⁰¹ He outlines two broad types (multicongregational and multiethnic church) of the MEC and then introduces different models under each category along with guiding principles. He avoids bias, choosing rather to present healthy examples of each kind. He is realistic, noting the

¹⁹⁹ Peart, *Separate No More*, 141.

²⁰⁰ Ortiz, *One New People*, 123-24.

²⁰¹ Ortiz, *One New People*, 37, See also 73.

tension between biblical ideals and everyday practice²⁰² and shows how different kinds of churches are achieving their goals of evangelism and discipleship.

Under the umbrella of multicongregation-type churches we find three models: the “renting model” that typically serves first-generation immigrant groups, the “celebration model” where occasional services combine with ethnic congregations that “demonstrate the kingdom of God in a world filled with racial strife” and allow second-generation immigrants to integrate with the dominant group. Last is the “integrative model” where the dominant group shares its facility with ethnic groups who make decisions and “influence the life and the structure of the church, an interdependence among the leaders of each group that conveys “one church with four congregations.”²⁰³ This book’s unique contribution for my purposes was that it gave me a greater appreciation for alternative models as truly viable and an increased awareness to stay alert to community changes surrounding our church.

All of these have contributed to helping GRIF clarify how to convert the gospel into structures that seek to highlight what it means to be a reconciling, outreaching and including community. One of the best overviews of the three major models of the MEC – the assimilated, pluralist and integrated – was *United by Faith*. Its recommended Integrated Multicultural Congregation model was adopted by GRIF and will be introduced in Chapter 6.

²⁰² Ortiz, *One New People*, 85.

²⁰³ Ortiz, *One New People*, 72.

Conclusion

This author is a grateful beneficiary of these learned writers and practitioners in the field of the MEC. He is better equipped for the challenge and joys of pastoring an inclusive congregation because of them. They wrote out of a deep acquaintance with God through his Word and prayer. Their writings also reflected a depth that comes through the peaks and valleys of cross-cultural human interaction. By life and thought, they adorn the gospel of reconciliation. In addition to the book summaries early in this chapter, a few unique contributions stand out.

First, Emerson and Smith in *Divided by Faith* brought the most painful lessons by exposing the historical roots as well as sociological forces that explain the reasons evangelicals prefer HUP churches with their own kind. The depth of their data showing how widespread this is in American culture was disturbingly compelling. It torpedoed passivity and provoked in me a fresh awareness of how hollow creeds without actions are. Especially painful in this regard was reading the “solutions” to racial injustices voiced by the thousands of born again Christians who mirrored precisely McGavran's unmet aspirations for the HUP, that if the hub is fixed on the wheel of reconciliation, the rim will take care of itself. They called evangelicals to find their prophetic voice.

Next, *United by Faith* was to *Divided by Faith* what Isaiah 40-66 was to Isaiah 1-39. The shift was nothing short of dramatic, from an autopsy to resuscitation. Making the difference for this reviewer were two things. Their exegesis of passages related to issues in racial reconciliation in the early church was solid. Second, the quality in which the authors identified and answered the most common objections to the MEC by HUP proponents were exceptional. Commending them was their humility, scholarship, empathy and uncompromising commitment to kingdom values. Their answers were as convincing as they were kind.

Raleigh Washington and Glen Kerhein's work provide a rare educational experience that gets beyond concepts of unity that may be lofty but impractical. This work made clear that just because the road of racial reconciliation is rocky does not mean that it is the wrong road. Their eight principles for a reconciling fellowship that have been hammered out in their bi-cultural church also apply broadly in an MEC.

This literature review also clarified for this pastor one of the roles of pastoral leadership of an MEC, a kind of cultural gatekeeper. Henriques sums up a three-fold function of MEC leaders: "sustainers of their cultural traditions that promote and help God's work, breakers of those traditions that hinder God's work and blenders of the traditions of the cultures represented in their church."²⁰⁴ These require of leaders theological reflection, prayerful discernment and possibly a process of consensus building with other leaders as we see in Acts 15.

The biggest surprise was how much agreement this reviewer found with the pioneer of the Church Growth Movement, Donald A McGavran. Especially after finding him almost uniformly criticized by HUP detractors, the shocking discovery is how the first four of the five kingdom-expanding principles gleaned from his writings and noted in this review are useful in our MEC! McGavran understands and respects ethnicity and knows how to use it for evangelistic advantage. Nothing prohibits GRIF from utilizing these same societal dynamics in a way that is fully compatible with a sound inclusive ecclesiology! In this way, today's MEC can finish what the pioneer first envisioned.

²⁰⁴ Pocock and Henriques, *Cultural Change*, 53.

BECOMING A MULTIETHNIC CHURCH
WHEN THE WORLD COMES TO YOUR DOORSTEP

VOLUME TWO

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
GORDON-CONWELL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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JOSEPH PAUL KNIGHT

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CHAPTER 6

JOURNEY INTO TRANSITION: FROM FIRST CHURCH TO GRAND RAPIDS INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP

...they began to report all things that God had done with them
and how He had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles.
— Acts 14:27 NASB

This project is an ethnographic study in which we recount the journey of a white, evangelical Midwestern congregation that transitioned into an ethnically inclusive church for the purpose of reaching out to its burgeoning multicultural and international neighborhood. Our story will draw from case studies and experiences from which central issues and principles emerged during the period from 1998 to 2010.¹ Narrating Paul's first missionary journey, Luke avoids language of self-adulation by reporting what he saw in doxological terms, "all things God had done." Such arose neither as a rhetorical device nor out of feigned humility but as an authentic sense of wonder in recognition that alternative explanations were inadequate. On a smaller scale but with equal recognition, this chapter aims to glorify God through GRIF's voice, attributing achievements to their ultimate source, covering innumerable human limitations with his unfailing mercy, and expressing grateful exhilaration that everyday people may share in the high calling of serving as the hands and feet of Jesus.

Grand Rapids First Church of the Nazarene (First Church) was founded in 1910 as the first Nazarene congregation in Michigan. In May of 2000 its 372 average worshipers were Anglo with the exception of three African Americans.² As an established church it was stable, mildly traditional, endowed with above-average musical

¹These recollections are taken from a decade of raw notes, journals, minutes, conversations, articles, fliers, sermons and interview summaries that have been amassed, organized and chronicled.

² Two of these had come through blended marriages and one had been a widow for many years. All have remained at GRIF, demonstrating character, commitment and courage.

talent and a vibrant spirit. In addition to many short-term mission projects overseas, it allocated an average of 11% of its annual income to global missions.

Nearly ninety years after its inception, First Church awakened to a new reality that called for change. Such did not spring from dwindling numbers, for its pews were full. Church life was comfortable, revenues were adequate and no impending crisis called for emergency measures. Nevertheless, in 1999 it faced a sociological reality pointing to a widening economic and ethnic gap between its members and surrounding population. People of color, both indigenous Americans and international immigrants, had moved into its neighborhood quietly but steadily. Grand Rapids' southeastern quadrant took on an increasingly global flavor that especially permeated its apartment complexes. Many of these included Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who, over the past 30 years, had migrated from every major world area. Additionally, fewer and fewer of those attending First Church actually lived in close proximity to the church facility. Many commuted to its Sunday services from across town, residing in more affluent suburbs with a number from neighboring townships. Meeting in what had become an outmoded facility, First Church faced difficult and defining choices.

Church leaders explored the option of purchasing property and relocating in more promising suburbs that would reflect a closer ethnic, cultural and socioeconomic match to its own members. Compensating for the financial investment would be a more comfortable facility which would undoubtedly attract more people from that new area. The church housed a Day Care that had thrived for several decades. Over time, however, its dedicated staff no longer attended First Church and, for all practical purposes, operated on a lease basis with the church. Its relationship was amiable, yet ceased to be an arm of First Church in enfolded families into the congregation. A second approach might be that First Church simply remain at its current site, continuing

as a physical presence yet relationally detached from its neighbors³ with exception to its Day Care, thus allowing it to continue. After considering both options, church leaders adopted a third course of action, one that has taken the church in a dramatically new direction. They sensed God calling them to plant three new churches,⁴ remodel their existing facility, and refocus the mother church to reach out, evangelize and incorporate its immediate community. This story narrates how, after an extended period of prayer, First Church took this third path and the results of that obedience.

Looking back over the first decade of this journey reveals identifiable stages. From the point of view of this pastor, five overlapping phases unfolded each with a main objective: the church believing, becoming, befriending, bearing witness and being community. Each contained a dynamic interplay between biblical benchmarks that were imparted through the pulpit, pitfalls that made reaching them difficult and pathways which we implemented in an effort to make them happen.

Pulpit Point – Overriding focus of exhortation based upon biblical and theological standards for church identity, witness and inclusion

Pitfalls – Hindrances preventing us from reaching those benchmarks, creating a performance gap between biblical vision and present reality

Pathways –Initiatives that GRIF put in place to reduce that gap

These phases emerge on a recurring continuum rather than in a straight line. Each new people group brought unique opportunities, issues and questions, occasionally calling us to reexamine previous decisions and adjust policies without abandoning our core

³ First Church has a long history of outreach initiatives into the community such as its Day Care, thriving bus ministry for underprivileged children, ministries for people with special needs, sponsoring a Cambodian family and reaching many in the Haitian community.

⁴ Appendix 1 sketches a dynamic interplay between birthing new congregations and refocusing the mother church through which the Holy Spirit brought an unexpected transformative influence on the church. It illustrates how theology often gets hammered out not in a vacuum nor during congregational stillness but in the disruptive parthenogenic throes of the *missio Dei*.

ideology. This chapter identifies the most important issues of each phase, what we did about it and how it turned out.

PHASE 1: The Church Believing – Congregational Buy-In

This lifting-off-the-runway stage required a cogent response to the question of why should we change, especially given the natural tendency to segregate into like-homogenous units.

Pulpit Point: Embrace the Vision

Biblical exhortations during this period were designed to stir us to embrace this vision of reaching out to our multicultural community in obedience to God's Word. This initial stage simply laid a biblical basis for the MEC (as seen in Chapter 2). It called individual members and church leaders to evaluate our view of the church and people of other cultures in light of these biblical benchmarks. Anticipation that this new journey would encounter significant challenges, we found confidence believing that obedience to a God-sized vision would draw from reservoirs of God-sized resources.

Pitfalls of Resistance

Congregational endorsement of the new plan encountered the following challenges and became the first birth pangs of the MEC. They are important because they deal with attitudes of which people are often unaware.

Converting an Ethos of Friendliness to Intentional Cross-Cultural Inclusion

The multicultural vision would not require a new openness, for First Church had always been friendly. It would necessitate, however, a new intentionality. The congregation had long reputation as a welcoming place to all kinds of people and could

not be justly accused as ethnically exclusive.⁵ As might be expected, the new vision of a broad ethnic sweep was met with majority support. The switch to be made here was not expanding the scope of its mission but in the strategic initiation to reach its changing neighborhood. By 1990, the City of Kentwood where many First Church members resided had already become the most ethnically diverse school district in the Grand Rapids area with only 91 percent Anglo while ethnic minorities continue to grow.⁶ Despite an openness to all people regardless of color or ethnicity, in 2000 non-whites at First Church totaled less than 1%. "Openness" and "friendliness" might very well be a matter of perspective. Travis M., one of the three African Americans, a member of First Church who was present at the time of the launch, was asked later on a survey one thing GRIF got right. He answered, "...opening the door of the church for anyone who wanted to come."⁷ This new vision to reach and include African and Hispanic Americans as well as crossing religious worlds of Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim populations that have immigrated here called for fundamental shift. At issue is whether or not the church could change from a stance of friendly non-exclusion that keeps nobody out to one of purposeful inclusion that finds a way to actively go out and bring them in.

Passing Novelty: Will this change last?

Some wondered if a vision to become multicultural was biblical and sustainable or trendy and prone to obsolescence. Closely related, some viewed it as a denominational emphasis: "Is this just another church program that will run its course?"

⁵ First Church history reveals the sponsoring of a Cambodian refugee family, a ministry to a number of Haitian families through a previous pastor who had previously served as missionary to Haiti and a daycare which enrolled many multicultural children from the community.

⁶ *Grand Rapids Press*. A 2005 study found 60 languages spoken in West Michigan. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the Hispanic population more than doubled in Ottawa County and tripled in Kent during the 1990's. Many of these, said the author, feel marginalized and are seeking for the "right fit in a multiethnic society." *Grand Rapids Press*, February 11, 2006, D3.

⁷ First Church Survey, Winter 2010.

Will it still be good in 2025 or will we then be forced to change it again?" Concerns over novelty, of course, are completely valid. Here the question was, will this last or is it an audacious dream that is destined to eventual collapse?

Overkill: Will the results merit our investment?

Convinced that First Church was already sufficiently friendly, a few viewed this new direction as an unwarranted imposition: "Our doors are already open to everyone. They can come if they want. We don't keep anybody out." To this author, this seemed to mask deeper issues, euphemistically voicing "it's going to cost me more than I want to pay." This concern raised the question of cost-benefit: will this be worth our effort? This was the snare that the authors of *Divided by Faith* and others⁸ had found so irksome, namely, that evangelicals who reside in societies with mixed populations can somehow confess diversity while practicing ethnic segregation. The nub of this issue is an ecclesiology of convenience, one that confesses catholicity while practicing the opposite through a composition that falls short of its creed. This hindrance ponders the likelihood of moving a congregation from reciting creeds to embracing people, from paying lip-service to lofty ideals to actually offering our lives for the other. Given our long patterns of ethnic isolation, will we be able to carry this through and meaningfully integrate?"

Respecting Long-Standing Members: Will this alienate the older generation?

Change can be difficult for older members who may feel overlooked, threatened, unappreciated, and their past efforts invalidated. Some experienced that unrest. The name of the church is cherished to those with special memories attached. Will the new pastor who does not yet know us disregard cherished memories? Will this new direction

⁸ See Chapter 5, especially the discussion on the Homogenous Unit Principle examined.

discard church identity, disrespect established values or overlook significant achievements made by previous generations? Is the congregation forsaking its established members? This obstacle felt by some raised fears of neglect and marginalization by the pursuit of new groups by their leaders.

Worship Style: Will we agree?

Almost toppling the vision in its conceptual stage were concerns based on the fear of future disputes over expressions of worship: "We can't agree now about music and it's just us. What's going to happen when people of other cultures start attending?" It hit us like a torpedo when a denominational executive, a man of color who had been invited to train our leaders, stood before us and said, "If you think people of color want to worship with you, you're naïve." This quandary considers the degree to which we can expect people from around the world and an assortment of cultures to unite in bringing praise to God while allowing particular voices the freedom to express that praise in ways that are personally meaningful to the worshipers.

Ethnic Confusion: Are we no longer a church for whites?

A few wondered if First Church was becoming a church for people of color instead of for whites. Upon observing our new name, Grand Rapids "International" Fellowship, some assumed whites would now take a second or outside place. This arose from anthropological assumptions coming from outside of Scripture that manifested itself in two ways. People from many cultures tend to equate "ethnic" with color and pigmentation. Strolling down ethnic aisles at grocery stores, eating ethnic foods, and creating ethnic departments across business, education and church sectors, society has been conditioned to make ethnic synonymous with non-white. That Anglo, German or Dutch people are no less ethnic than African American or Guatemalan is a fact that often eludes us. But a defeating reverse-ethnocentricity also presents itself in a

“wish-I-were” impulse, a discontentment that arises when people of color attach a premium on whiteness. This malady stems from a prevalent but insidious and unbiblical view of human beings that regards white as the desired norm and non-white as departmental or inferior.

Ownership: Who really wants this?

Is this venture the vision of the congregation or “Joe’s vision?” Should it fail, will it divide the church in the aftermath? It could strike wounds deep and wide in the body of Christ, end valued friendships, and drive people away. The concern here aimed at avoiding catastrophic schism, protecting the body of Christ and asks how the vision of the few can become the conviction of the many.⁹

Pathways to Acceptance

To suggest GRIF began this endeavor with detailed plans in hand would be grossly misleading. Any notion that we had figured out at the front end how to get engaged cross-culturally and open to being authentically multiethnic is sheer pretense. We flourished in vision but famished in strategy. Conceptually convinced, emotionally enthused and strategically naïve, our prayers have often been simply, “O God, what do we do?” Ten years ago, only a relatively few white American churches were making concerted efforts to integrate African American and Hispanic populations (historic ethnic minorities) and fewer still strategically reached out to religious groups such as Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim populations who had migrated into their communities. Unaware of experts to emulate, we felt the daunting task captured by the authors of *United by Faith*: “This is not something to play at. It is serious business, involving the eternal lives of real

⁹ Two visions dovetailed into one. This pastor was hired with the understanding that the church would become inclusive while its leaders had previously believed God was calling them to reach its immediate community.

people. Becoming a multiracial congregation is not an afterthought that we ‘tack on’ to our normal way of doing church; it is a fundamental shift in understanding and practice.”¹⁰ Assuming it necessary to create our own template, we implemented the following initiatives.

Measured Acceptance through a Congregational Survey

We took a survey to measure the level of support to the new vision by First Church. The Church Board and congregation had already given official approval to become inclusive upon my hire.¹¹ Why then was this measurement considered necessary? Experience suggests that voting in favor of a new vision is easier than making the changes necessary to see it become a reality. In the words of Sharon Norman, later hired as GRIF’s Worship Pastor, “everyone Amens it, but not all do it.” While resonating with this dream from the start, was the congregation aware of the costs involved? A more personalized feedback venue yielded added information that a yes-no vote could offer. The survey, distributed and collected in a Sunday morning service, asked three questions:

Do you support this vision? Why or why not?
Can you think of any benefits resulting from becoming an inclusive church?
What do you see as the biggest challenges that will face an inclusive church?¹²

¹⁰ Curtiss Paul De Young, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (NY: Oxford, 2003), 139-40. They predicated this on “the argument that we must get beyond incorporating people in a superficial manner – sing a few songs from the culture, say a few prayers in Spanish, get some people involved in the work of the church...”

¹¹ It was understood that First Church would refocus the church multiculturally to reach its inclusive neighbors (to the extent of changing its name), allow me teaching privileges in global areas if God opens those doors, and hire a full-time church administrator.

¹² This survey taken on December 3, 2000 revealed the following:
(a) The majority supported this vision because it directly served the scope of the Great Commission, showing “true Christianity in action,” it was “important to Jesus,” and it will “increase our mission mindedness.”

(b) A range of benefits was identified: gaining knowledge of other cultures, developing friends from different backgrounds, an example to children (“our kids will grow up without prejudice” or “show our kids how God looks at humanity”), the educational value (“mutual learning from each other” and discover “ways to reach out across cultures”), stimulate spiritual growth (“we will grow in accepting others” and cause “dependence

Honored Former "First Church" through "A Night to Remember"

Any congregation at ninety will have a treasured generation of people with a depth of character won by its loyalty through decades of seasons and cycles. How can leaders bring radical change, even to the point of replacing its historic name, without alienating its most faithful? "A Night to Remember" provided an opportunity to set the future aside and hone in on the church's past by bringing to the forefront its memorable achievements through faithful members of First Church. Former pastors came and participated. Music was taken from every decade of the 1900's. A video featuring past memories of the church captured its positive and upbeat spirit. We asked a beloved former pastor, Rev. Branson Roberts, to preach. After reminiscing great moments from earlier days and celebrating God's faithfulness, he championed the new direction of First Church in a compelling way. This change, he said, is really nothing new but simply reflects the same missionary spirit that has always been part of First Church DNA. By doing so, he wisely merged the new vision into the church's unchanging priorities and historic practices. The evening concluded with a massive group-walk onto the front lawn, wrapping the old FC sign with a large banner with brilliant colors that read, "Grand Rapids International Fellowship."

Despite the goodwill created by this event, some senior adults and younger families found it easier to change churches rather than to endure change in their own. Several senior adults remained and have become indispensable to the church and its outreach. Many of these have discovered new surprises, seized by a new future,

upon God for something big"), congregation invigoration ("shake up our church and help us to unite"), and worship (discover "new ways and more expressive soul quality").

(c) The anticipated challenges included "changing the way we 'do church', including the acceptance of different styles of worship and church music; handling "disruptive children" who have not learned "proper behavior," and adaptation to different foods and customs. One senior adult raised a concern of partiality; that is, embracing some ethnic minorities while rejecting others.

enjoying a more intimate walk with God and renewed sense of purpose in providing excellent refugee care. These have often been caught off-guard by how much love they feel for those of a different ethnic background whom God has put in front of them, people who are loving and honoring them right back.

Vigorously Promoted the Vision

It became necessary to vigorously promote, publicize, stimulate interest and proclaim this new direction as a worthwhile endeavor. Again, one may ask reasons for this, given the congregational vote. At this stage, the MEC is still a hollow concept into which everyone injects his or her ideas. Definitions are critical, distinguishing its biblical elements from alternate constructs. Some needed convincing that this new direction was not only the right thing to do but that it could be done. It was also important to show that this would not inflict an ordeal on the church but that we would be rewarded with divine blessings for our obedience. These messages came primarily through the pulpit, informal conversations with lay leaders and Church Board highlights. In the pulpit, we presented to the congregation a solid biblical foundation for this vision. Addressing the overkill pitfall that “First Church already is friendly enough” required a rationale that warranted these sweeping changes. Four key reasons were offered: our demographic population allows it, our racially-fractured society cries out for it, the scope of the Great Commission encompasses it and the gospel message graciously proclaims it. The combination of these sociological, missiological and soteriological realities helped us form the following compelling ecclesiological mandates.¹³ The inclusive church will illustrate the gospel of peace (Eph 2:14), reflect the true colors of the church (Gal 3:26-28), validate Jesus’ unique claims as God’s gift for the world (John 17:23) and, finally, reach the outer rim of society (Matt 28:19; Luke 24:47).

¹³ These are part of the curriculum for church membership.

Promoting the vision involved more than talking it up. The congregation had to see it modeled, however imperfectly, by its leaders starting with the pastor. It had to become something natural to our lifestyle. Conversations involving this writer with people of different religions or ethnicities on airplanes, at the gym or coffee shop would be passed on to the church. Some in the congregation did not need this, but for others it was important to see that meaningful engagement can happen naturally in our diverse social milieu.

The first 15 minutes of every Board meeting is devoted to "Pastoral Highlights" in which key missional exchanges from the previous month are shared. Driving this mission, we all knew, was not new Board policies nor inclusive structures. Instead, touching lives with God's grace and compassion must become the daily habit starting with the church's core. Even beyond that, it was important to convey how these expanding interactions through which grace could flow arose out of our relationship with God. Of paramount importance was to demonstrate that listening to God precedes developing a heart for those beyond one's own culture group. Rather than the new pastor's dream, this new direction must be traced back to its point of origin, the gracious heart of God.

Exposed Members to the Demographic Changes through a Neighborhood Survey

How does the vision of the few become the conviction of the many? Even after our demographic study, it is difficult to grasp the statistics of a changing neighborhood. In the very early stages of our transition, we wanted to find out the needs of our unchurched neighbors. Fifteen adult pairs canvassed the community on two consecutive Sunday mornings with four questions and received 333 responses.¹⁴ This provided

¹⁴ These questions were adapted from Rick Warren at the Saddleback Church: (1) What do you think is the greatest need in this area (children/teens, family crises, finances, etc.)? (2) Are you actively attending any church? (3) Why do you think most people don't attend church? (4) If you were to look for a church to attend,

feedback as well as an unexpected bonus. It allowed many of our members to see those demographic changes firsthand, an effective way of awakening us to new realities. During a brief training session just beforehand, they were told that they would likely visit homes of people belonging to non-Christian religions. One volunteer later admitted telling himself that this expectation was exaggerated, for “this is West Michigan!” A surprise awaited him. Answering the doors at his first three homes were Buddhists! Really seeing our communities sometimes requires more than what census data can deliver.

Made an Effort to Align Ourselves with Biblical Criteria for Worship

Even before discussions to refocus the church, First Church had already encountered disagreements among its members regarding what style of music should be used for public worship. Concerns arose that with the addition of more cultural groups those conflicts would increase. This pitfall attached premium significance to each group’s culturally acquired modes of worship. It raised an added question of what this change will cost in terms of what one must give up. The complex concerns of worship in a MEC require a nuanced pathway. On the one hand, praising God in one’s mother tongue resonates deeply and universally. A subtle danger lurks, however, if culturally-acquired motions of worshipers share equal importance with the Triune God, the one being worshiped. During believers’ services on Sunday nights we explored biblical criteria of worship, highlighting three biblical principles to guide our expectations and practices in gathered worship: complete surrender to God in light of Christ’s costly sacrifice (Rom

what kind of things would you look for? Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth Without Compromising Your Message and Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 190.

12:1-3), considerate edification on behalf of others (1 Cor 12-14) and directing our focus to the one true God (John 4:23-25).¹⁵

First, worship offers the self as a living sacrifice in response to the merciful sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Rom 12:1). At the heart of worship is surrender to God and results in ongoing renewal and transformation by his Word (Rom 12:2). By virtue of our many different traditions in a MEC, everyone must sacrifice some personal preferences. Different rituals or practices will appeal to some and not to others.

Second, corporate worship considers what will build up others in the body. In addressing the practices of glossalalia and prophecy in public worship, Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 elucidates one of the essential purposes of corporate worship, namely to edify the whole church. Such gatherings call for each member to “pursue love” (v 1). That pursuit means giving consideration to what will benefit other believers – young and old, rich and poor, lettered and simple, domestic and foreign. Self-edification is a worthy endeavor for private worship (vv 17-18) and indeed necessary, but when gathered (v 26) in the “church”¹⁶ the group takes precedent. The verb “edify” in its variant forms appears seven times in this chapter (1 Cor 14:3, 4, 5, 12, 18, 19, 26) concluding with verse 26: “Let all things be done for edification” (NASB). This emphasis led us to self-evaluation in the form of two simple questions, one of personal preference and the other of spiritual principle: “What worship style do I prefer?” and “What am I willing to forgo for the benefit of others?”

Third, worship looks beyond appropriate worshiping actions to the worthiness of its Subject. The conversation between Jesus and the woman at the well in John 4 reveals contrasting worship priorities. Of foremost importance to the woman it seemed

¹⁵ Since then two more have been added and will be noted in Phase 5.

¹⁶ References to the assembled church are in vv 4, 5, 12, 19, 23, 26, 28.

was the tradition handed down to her by her parents, the location of worship (John 4:20). She had left out the supreme Focus of worship in stressing the provincial manner of worship. Jesus supplied what she had omitted. Jesus gently provides her verb to “worship” with a direct object, “the Father” (John 4:23). Completely ignoring the festering historic and divisive contrasts between Samaritan and Jewish worship, Jesus clarifies the Father’s heart about the manner in which people worship him, “in spirit and in truth.” Instead he identifies its supreme Subject,¹⁷ and thereby pinpoints the conditions of acceptable worship as proper relationship rather than religious protocol.¹⁸

Looking back now, a fourth should have been added. Corporate worship is further rendered acceptable or non-acceptable on the basis of lifestyle, of living lives of compassionate justice throughout the week. Encompassing life in its totality, worship cannot be restricted to a one or two hour weekly event. Worship is validated by a lifestyle of godliness.¹⁹ Making time for thoughtful and considerate cross-cultural relationships during the week paves the way for multicultural worship on the weekend. If congregations of any ethnic stripe experience chronic strife on Sundays, it raises less questions about what transpires during that hour and more about the quality of its fellowship during the week. This pitfall becomes an opportunity to return to the fundamentals of worship that include surrender of self, thoughtfulness of others, focus on God and lifestyles that care for one another. Sharon Norman, Worship Pastor at GRIF, has it right. Asked why she wants to lead a congregation in worship, she answered:

¹⁷ Exclusive worship given to the Father honors the first commandment (Exod 20:3; 34:4; Deut 6:13; Ps 66:4, etc.).

¹⁸ This manner of worshipping “in spirit and in truth” avoids violation of the second commandment (Exod 20:4).

¹⁹ Integrating social responsibility with acceptable worship consistently constitutes a fundamental biblical requirement of God’s people. See Isa 1:11-20; 58:1-12; Amos 4:4-5; Matt 15:6, 8-9, 1 Cor 11:18, 1 John 4:7ff, etc.

One of the best places for me to be is in worship. My life, my being, everything I do to have a total submitted will to God, and that is an act of worship. You know we talk about singing and all these other things. And singing is wonderful, but it is only my expression of my love for God and encouragement for others, but my worship starts when I rise in the morning. I seek Him in the morning. I seek to do His will all day.²⁰

PHASE 2: The Church Becoming – Preparation for Multicultural Guests

What changes must occur in a white congregation to become a welcoming environment for people in its surrounding multiethnic community? Preparation involved a range of organizational, spiritual, aesthetic and social adjustments.

Pulpit Point: Change for Them

We must change for the welfare of others. The “church becoming” refers not to its gradual maturity or incremental evolution. It points instead to metamorphosis, one resulting from intentional adaptation. Its pattern traces back to its preeminent prototype, for “the Word became flesh and dwelled among us” (John 1:1, 14). That singular “becoming” into divine impoverishment produced another becoming of human enrichment: “... though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, so that we through his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Later, the apostle to the nations adopted this pattern with Empire changing results: “To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak; I have become all things to all men, so that I may by all means save some. I do all things for the sake of the gospel...” (1 Cor 9:22-23; see vv 19-23 NASB).

Like Jesus and Paul, the church that becomes less will see a world that can become more. Our commitment to the great commission is measured by this criteria: how much will we empty our pockets, carve space in our schedules, abandon our

²⁰ Sharon Norman, GRIF Service recording, August 18, 2002.

reputations and step across cross cultural borders so that lost people may come to know the Father in whom is eternal life (John 17:4).

The time to change is now. New parents do not wait for the baby to arrive before preparing the nursery. Before bringing their precious bundle home they have already gone to great lengths of readiness. The church becoming is the church-in-wait. It believes. It anticipates. Excitement builds. It draws creative inspiration by the substance of things hoped for. Before the arrival of the first person of another culture, advance faith-based changes lets them know they were expected. Exhortations aimed at converting our personal faith into anticipatory actions.

Pitfalls Producing a Lack of Readiness

Tendency to Launch Prematurely

For many of us, a compelling vision comes with a natural impulse to get started, quickly publicize our new name and immediately guests from different cultures. Mature minds prevailed, persuading us to postpone Grand Opening by ten months, thus giving adequate time to become more multicultural-friendly before these guests arrive. In the long run, this actually became a kind of delayed accelerant that hastened later progress.

White Ignorance to Unique Hardships of Ethnic Minorities

As Christ's people, Christians are to have tender compassion (Col 3:12) towards those who are carrying heavy burdens. Compassion can arise whenever there is an exposure to those misfortunes. Logic suggests that if exposure stimulates pity then ignorance can breed apathy. For many Anglos like myself who were raised in suburbia U.S.A., the ability to feel the pain of an ethnic minority poses a challenge. Even attending a biracial high school in the tense late 1960's inadequately prepared me to appreciate what many African and Hispanic Americans regularly endure. By developing friendships and accompanying African Americans in restaurants and public places have

helped me see firsthand how often they are watched with suspicion and treated differently than me. If ignorance imposes distance between us, then awareness can bring us closer together.

Impatience Fatigue and Imbalanced Preaching

During the initial waiting stage, Sunday messages were heavily tilted toward the theme of the multicultural church. Criticism that the congregation was receiving biblical teaching that was imbalanced rather than whole was probably justified. One member recalls that "Sermon after sermon called us to find the place to serve [in this vision] where God was leading us." Many seemed to reach their saturation point. From the perspective of the pastor, what needed changing was not message theme but the "hues in the pews." Once the call to cross-cultural outreach was put into practice, he thought, the pulpit will gladly broaden its range of topics. Then one day a person came and asked, "Okay, Pastor, I get it. I agree, we should do it. But how? What's your plan?" This left him stymied, calling people to action without a strategy to offer them. To make matters worse, our initial forays into our neighborhood met with uniformly dismal results. Nothing was working and the protracted lull, despite all the early assurances of this new vision, made this one of the most difficult phases. As pastor and people, we found ourselves long on vision, short on strategy and mutual on irritation. These early efforts were aptly described by Eva, GRIF's Administrator, as a "lot of net casting with no results." "Safety Day" had been designed to relieve our neighbors who had expressed concerns for their safety. Only a handful of people were attracted to the fire trucks in our parking lot. Mailings did little more than deplete our budget and failed in moving us to our goal. Soon after changing our name, we mass mailed invitations so our neighbors could learn about the exciting new changes in their neighborhood church. These produced only one person. Prior to launching an edgy new sermon series, another costly mailing

went to 14,000 homes. Heavy snows came and only 25 guests attended. All combined – a strong dose of vision casting, initiatives with paltry returns and impatience fatigue – might very well have raised questions of the vision’s viability. That, thankfully, did not occur.

Pathways to Readiness

Pastoral Support by Leaders

Calling for changes in a congregation so that minorities would come and feel welcome called for patient resolution on the part of leaders. The church had already diminished in size, including much of its lay leader force, after giving at least 100 members to three church plants. Now others were making exits for reasons far less noble. Announcing at monthly Board meetings the name of another family leaving the church tested resolve. Two factors proved crucial in sustaining both church vision and pastoral tenure. First was the unfailing loyalty of our Board members (and staff) who somehow believed when signs of hope were in short supply. Marsha T., a lay ministry leader looking back at one thing GRIF got right was “not giving up when it didn’t happen as fast as we wanted. Patience and perseverance in the face of people leaving, disagreements on direction, unsure of the next steps.”²¹ Their devotion was heroic. Second, the fresh wind of Scripture prevented despair and kept hope alive. For “through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom 15:5, 4 NASB).

Further preparation occurred at four levels: organizational and structural, attitudinal and aesthetic.

²¹ Marsha T., First Church Member Survey, Winter, 2010.

Organizational Preparation

Developed an Ideological Core. We found it necessary to rebuild the church from the inside out rather than simply overlaying cosmetic changes in style and decor. An ideological core is a set of written statements that defines a congregation's identity or DNA. It is expressed primarily in its statement of mission, core values that then translate into strategies, functional structures²² and assists in bringing a "tightness of fit" to hiring decisions. It integrates unchanging Scripture with changing context.

Mission Statement. The above process eventually resulted in the following statement: "Our mission is to connect people in our multicultural community to Jesus Christ and, together, grow in full devotion to Him."²³ This over-arching avowal summarized succinctly what we stand for.²⁴

Core Values. For congregations populated multiethnically, what values are essential? After sufficient time had passed for some agonizing setbacks and exhilarating advances, the following statements were crafted by the pastor and later adopted by the church Board. Using the acrostic, GLOBAL, they are:

²² A church management training/mentoring organization, *Ministry Advantage*, was of great help to us in facilitating this process. They insisted on the importance of taking pains to develop this core rather than attempting to implement change on the fly.

²³ Earlier attempts at the mission statement accurately captured the vision, but were too wordy. This statement was borrowed in part, localized and given memorable precision.

²⁴ It later fell into lockstep with our denominational mission statement, "to make Christ-like disciples in the nations." Denominational leader Nina Gunter noted how this "makes clear the preeminence of Jesus Christ and says that Christ-likeness is THE ESSENCE of holiness." Nina Gunter, *Grow* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, Winter, 2007), 27.

Goal of character transformation rather than cultural conformity²⁵
 Life of Prayerful Obedience²⁶
 Offsite relational evangelism²⁷
 Belong to a small group for authentic relationships and spiritual growth²⁸
 Acts of Service through the Holy Spirit²⁹
 Laugh and Learn³⁰

Streamlined Ministries – Prioritized for Mission. This step involved refocusing resources of time, money and programs according to the agreed plan. What programs and ministries will best drive the new statement of mission? Saying ‘yes’ to the best thing required us to say ‘no’ to good things. This biblical principle of pruning (John 15:1f) is

²⁵ Becoming like Jesus Christ through the Spirit is our goal (2 Cor 8:9; Phil 2:5ff). Rather than Americanize foreigners we aim to see Christ formed by His Word of grace and through the Holy Spirit. Through the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2) and putting on the garments of Christ (Col 3:11-12), a new culture arises by the Spirit, a Christ-community that transcends human cultures and casts a redeeming influence on fallen cultures. (John 17:17; Rom 12; 2 Cor 3:18; Gal 5:22-25; Eph 4:22-24; Col 3:12-15; 2 Pet 1:3-4).

²⁶ Prayer is our first work as the first Christians were devoted to prayer (Acts 2:46). The power to push back darkness is crucial for the MEC. Every significant advancement in our work has been preceded by concerted prayer. Our battle is not against rival religions, but “the god of this world [who] has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” (2 Cor 5:4 NRSV). Prayer banishes indifference, pettiness, lethargy and faithlessness. We pray because we need God and God answers prayer (Matt 6:5-15; Luke 11:1-13; John 15:5-8; 1 Cor 1:9; 1 Thess 5:17).

²⁷ Proclamation follows incarnation. Evangelism runs on the track of compassion and friendship. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” By the Spirit in us Christ enters human communities at large by our actions and words is to make an invisible God conspicuous (2 Cor 8:9; 1 Thess 2:8; Ezek 36:13; Luke 19:10; Rom 10:20). Note: “Offsite” is not limited to its strict geographical sense, but includes the use of the church facility for non-religious gatherings on behalf of unsaved neighbors. Marsha T., who leads English class, views this as an extraordinary reverse mission: “Instead of sending us out into the world, God has brought Hindus and Muslims to us. That is a miracle all by itself.” Marsha T., “FC Member Survey,” Winter 2010.

²⁸ Early Christians were devoted to “the fellowship,” where life intersected with grace, need with provision, loneliness with companionship, brokenness with healing and temptation with loving accountability. A refugee from Bosnia put it bluntly: “You don’t understand. We don’t need friends; we need family!” We belong not to an invisible church but to the body of Christ, the family of God, the household of faith. (Rom 12:9-13; 15:5-6; cf. Matt 18:20; Heb 10:24).

²⁹ Every believer is called and gifted by God to serve in the body of Christ. Each has a job to do as “each part does its work” so that the whole body is “built up.” Recipients of divine grace are equipped to render service that is fully engaged rather than halfhearted. In the eyes of God peak performance is not work that is humanly strenuous but divinely originated, “faith working itself through love.” Good works springing from robust faith glorify God (Rom 12:3-8; 1 Cor 12; Gal 5:6; Eph 2:10; Titus 3:8; 2:14; 1 Pet 4:10;).

³⁰ A MEC is a welcome center for strangers. “Laugh and learn” describes the sanctified levity, the freedom to try new things without fear of reprisal. It is the ability to laugh at itself. Rather than walking on eggshells, the Spirit of adoption creates freedom of belonging in God’s family (Gal 4:6-7; 3:27-28). Bold initiatives spring from the freedom to lovingly serve one another (Gal 5:13). On top of all this, a mutually patient endurance with each other’s honest mistakes (Gal 5:23) will adorn the pursuit of cross-cultural relationships. We also value a community of learning, resulting in steady improvement that comes through practice. God’s kingdom is not high-strung over secondary matters, but is all about righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17; 15:7-12; Col 3:12-14; 4:5-6)!

designed to ensure greater fruitfulness. “If you want to make a lasting impact, then you need to eliminate what you do *well* for the sake of what you can potentially do *best*...Devoting a little of yourself to everything means committing a great deal of yourself to nothing.”³¹

A Strategic Planning Committee looked carefully at existing ministries, taking everything off the table and replaced only those that best get us to our mission. This task called for discernment, sensitivity and courage. The committee also implemented measures to align all departments and avoid silos of isolated ministry. An example of a ministry that had been doing “well” for 38 years was our daycare.³² The initial pain incurred by this “pruning” has been amply compensated with the ability to meet needs in our neighborhood.

Repetition. GRIF’s mission statement is repeated every Sunday during that period once called “announcements.” That portion of the service, “Connecting Moments,” strategically integrates GRIF’s programs into our mission and shows people where they can be involved.

Hired Staff to Reflect the Vision. Our pastoral staff, church Board, greeters and platform on Sundays were unanimously populated with Anglo people. After a long search for a Worship Pastor, Sharon Norman saw our ad and inquired. The more we talked the more obvious it became that she had the gifts, graces and the maturity to become the first African American worship pastor in the ninety year history of our

³¹ Andy Stanley addresses this human tendency toward over commitments to good activities in his excellent chapter, “Narrow the Focus: Do fewer things in order to make a greater impact.” Reggie Joiner, Lane Jones and Andy Stanley, *7 Practices of Effective Ministry* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2004), 99-118.

³² While it had a celebrated history of shaping thousands of children over its years of operation, it was not enfolded them into the church family. To help arrive at the decision, two staff members met with 25 to 30 local service agencies. They brought their data to the Board and together we determined that the need for another quality daycare was not as crucial as it had been in previous times. Relational bridges between GRIF members and the students of KCCA were all but absent. In an effort to be good stewards of our resources by not duplicating services, closing the school gives us opportunity to focus our resources even more effectively.

church. This woman of prayer has a special gift for music and worship. On her first Sunday in August 2002, she was interviewed. Looking over a congregation of almost all white faces, she was asked, "You know we are trying to become a church that reaches people from every nationality, race, color, language and tribe. There are many great black churches in Grand Rapids. What draws you to a church with this vision?" The candor of her reply revealed an honest heart that knows Jesus:

I really like the idea of dispelling myths. When a black person sees a white person, the first thing we might think is they just might be racist. When a white person sees a black person, you might clutch your purse. When we see an Asian person, they're just in it for the tax dollars and all this other stuff. But when you have the opportunity to worship with all of God's people, it messes the whole idea of what you think about a particular culture. And we have the opportunity to change the world just by the way we love each other and when we start loving each other independent of color and begin to appreciate all of our backgrounds and where we've come from, then we become a united nations of praise.³³

The eight years that Sharon has served on this staff have stretched and enriched us. She lends a perspective on discussions that arise from her ethnic heritage. More than perspective, however, her solidarity with African Americans faced with an ongoing legacy of suffering allows our staff to catch glimpses of that pain, reminding us that GRIF is called as an agent of grace to the multicultural as well as international community. After her first service a long-time member of First Church said that for the first time he believes GRIF's vision will happen. "Hiring her tells me you're really serious about this."

In 2007 Phil Starr was hired as youth pastor. GRIF represents not only an international but a multicultural church. Raised in the deep south, Phil falls under the second category. While living there he showed rare courage and conviction in reaching out to African Americans in the inner city. His thick southern drawl set him apart in West Michigan and it has been suggested more than once that he enroll in our English classes, advice he takes with grace and humor. Among the qualifications that this white

³³ GRIF service recording, August 18, 2002.

man brings to lead a MEC teen group are his identification with people in poverty and extraordinary relational skills with parents and teens alike.

Mental and Spiritual Preparation

Learned from Non-Anglo Christians. We invited guest speakers from ethnic minorities who share our heart for the MEC to come and lend support to this vision. They brought a perspective from a person of color, enthusiasm for this dream, identified probable obstacles that we would likely face, and pointed us in the right direction. Mayor Bill Hardiman of Kentwood, a devout African American Christian, wisely summarized its demands in what he called the “3-S Requirement.” We must:

Search our hearts – Let’s weed out sinful prejudice.
Go S-L-O-W – Let’s prepare for a long journey;
Practice Solidarity – Let’s stick together!

Dr. Oliver Phillips, an intellectual man of color with a dramatic testimony of God’s grace, met with all of our ministry leaders for a weekend to help prepare us for what was ahead. He gave us a useful metaphor, stating that “we are building a great cathedral, one brick at a time.” Like those of Europe, it will not be completed in a single generation, so we must celebrate every advancement when a new brick is laid. Solomon Dinakarans, a church planter and pastor in Bangalore, India offered practical advice for sharing Christ with people from a Hindu context. Dr. David Anderson from Bridgeway Community in Baltimore shared via *Defining Moments* CD excellent insights from his experience pastoring a multicultural church. In addition to these, specialists in cross-cultural ministry from Anglo backgrounds should be mentioned. Kevin Dougherty, Ph.D., then sociology professor at Calvin College, showed an interest in GRIF. Dougherty specializes in ethnically inclusive congregations and was a valuable resource of bibliographic material as well as personal encouragement. A specialist from a refugee

resettlement agency, Bethany Christian Services, broadened our view to the international world of the refugee and ideas for interaction and public worship.³⁴

Enlarged Our Hearts for Ethnic Minorities. Preparation for receiving indigenous and foreign ethnic minorities into a white church required basic understanding about what they have endured and continue to face. A Nazarene medical doctor living in Bangalore defined compassion as “your pain in my heart.” Before the burning pain of one can be shared by another, however, it must be made known. If ignorance of another’s agony poses a detriment to compassion, then these services needed to expose painful truth.

Preparing for African Americans. Travis M., one of the three African American First Church members, was asked what excited him the most about this new vision: “Seeing other people of color.” He expressed no reservations about this new direction. A preaching series on racial reconciliation increased our capacity for compassion by helping us to better understand the challenges of African Americans. The city of Grand Rapids has racial wounds crying out for healing. As Anglos we often fail to understand the reluctance of African Americans to worship with white congregations. A three week message series, “Bridging the Racial Divide,” called us to three reconciling actions:

Week 1: UNDERSTAND – Honestly face what happened to African American people by White Americans. Historical accounts were read. Pastor Sharon sang Negro spirituals.

Week 2: AFFIRM – Declare what we are by creation. Dispel the myth of many races, but that we are one race, the human race. Recognize contributions of different ethnic groups. Show that we are related by divine creation (Gen 1:26-18; Acts 17:26-28).³⁵

³⁴ For public worship, read Scripture in three or four languages. For conversation, ask about their traditions such as Thanksgiving, Christmas or New Year. Also she suggested a quarterly “Marco Polo Dinner” in which a foreigner provides music, entertainment and artifacts from his/her country. Look for ways to provide them with friendship such as watching the World Cup soccer tournament together.

³⁵ Part of this message celebrates distinguishing contributions of various ethnicities as a reflection of a creative God. This goes against the grain of the popular view that prejudice is an outcome of difference.

Week 3: CELEBRATE – Proclaim reconciliation through the death of Jesus Christ. Let the walls fall down! Broken humanity is repaired at the cross as symbolized by the stain-glass window, God's stunning new mosaic called the church. It doesn't matter what color you are, as long as your blood is red. Concluded with communion (Gal 3:28-29; Eph 2:13-15; Col 3:11-14).

From this pastor's point of view, this series provided a critical component for our readiness by exposing the depth of pain inflicted by racism in our nation's history, its lingering effects, and the lengths to which God went to heal his human family.³⁶ The degree to which that new information alone brought a corrective attitudinal shift in the mind of this pastor illustrates the transformative effects of mental renewal (Rom 12:2). When unfamiliar reliable historical data was brought out into the open it evoked an enlarged capacity for authentic compassion (Rom 12:15-16), one of the quintessential hallmarks of Christ (Col 3:12) that, in turn, guides commensurate action. In the present case, it had a mitigating effect on privately held judgments toward African Americans that had been based on partial information and at the same time a heightened respect for a persevering spirituality that uniquely enriches the whole Body of Christ. We have followed up annually with messages aimed at festering wounds of injustice in the hopes that God will use GRIF to bring the saving gospel of reconciliation as medicine for these deep injuries. Pulpit links to program, feeding local ministries that aim to relieve human agony and lift human dignity.³⁷

Stephen Pinker debunks that flawed theory in his chapter, "The Fear of Inequality," *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (NY: Viking Press, 2002), 141-58.

³⁶ If we should repeat this series, a fourth week will be added called "Bridge" which will explore hands-on ways to build bridges by applying the principles introduced by Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein in *Breaking Down Walls: A Model for Reconciliation in an Age of Strife* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1993).

³⁷ The Isaiah 58 series, "Hearts for God, Hands for Justice," fed into Kids Hope, a program through which GRIF "adopted" Hamilton Elementary School, sending 20 responsible adults into the school each week for one hour, each adult meeting one-on-one to mentor a high-risk child. Others identified with the poor through a poverty simulation or raising money through a hunger walk. Many became English tutors.

Preparing for Foreigners and Refugees. What “Bridging the Racial Divide” did to prepare us for African Americans, other messages endeavored to do for welcoming scores of refugees moving into our community. As Americans, it is easy to overlook their real world, seeing them instead as visitors here to advance economically instead of someone who has:

...fled persecution because of race, religion, nationality, opinion or membership in a particular social group...and out of fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country... [These have been] forced to flee homes suddenly or unexpectedly in large numbers as a result of armed conflict, internal strife, systematic violations of human rights, natural or man-made disasters within the territory of their own country.³⁸

These messages explored specific biblical instructions to the people of God aimed at alleviating the plight of all resident foreigners. In our case, this includes some who have moved to Grand Rapids for purposes of business. The vast majority, however, are bona fide refugees who arrive out of desperation. Their predicament includes catastrophic loss of life, leisure and liberty.

Sources abound that describe the strident challenges facing refugees, both those occurring in their native country and the new obstacles facing them after arriving here. As a pastor, one resource that especially helped to expose the wounds caused by displacement was *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies*.³⁹ These authors provide their readers with an accurate look into three dimensions of their predicament. First, “hidden wounds,” remind us that “displacement is basically invisible...[and] is easily overlooked because it seems to lack evident substance and scale beyond the individual” and how preachers are positioned to “draw this reality into the open and make

³⁸ Refugees as defined by the 1951 UN Convention on Refugees with its full text accessible at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49da0e466.html>.

³⁹ James R. Nieman and Thomas G. Rogers, *Preaching to Every Pew: Cross-Cultural Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press), 2001.

it visible.”⁴⁰ Next, “perilous journeys” describe how they “feel homesick, nostalgic, or alienated, [with] a sense of being in motion from one reality to another, enduring a transitional existence while perpetually waiting to arrive.”⁴¹ Third, “special bonds” notes the way that displacement of first generation adults and their offspring eventually “creates unusual alliances beyond family or ethnicity.”⁴² They note the critical role that people of faith can play in assisting the displaced:

Religious beliefs...often provide crucial cultural reinforcement in the face of corrosive displacement. In particular, our respondents described the perceived importance of the religious community as a microcosm by which a former setting could be maintained or a new one introduced and embraced ... Piety provides a shelter amid other kinds of displacement ...⁴³

This shelter of piety would later prove true in GRIF’s embrace of the refugee. But that is getting ahead of the story. Once arriving in the USA, refugees typically adjust to their new setting in one of four ways: reject their native cultures by an intentional assimilation into American culture, separate exclusively into the comfortable circles of their own culture, integrate their former culture into their new culture (best) or, finding themselves so devastated, they marginalize themselves by rejecting both cultures and simply give up (worst).

How to Treat Strangers. Since GRIF sits in a community with a significant immigrant population, we examined what the Scriptures had to say about the way Christians are to relate to others of different backgrounds. Messages on hospitality and proper treatment of foreigners have focused on three biblical responsibilities: (1) Offer them protection (Lev 19:33-34); (2) Provide their basic needs (Deut 24:19; Isa 58:7-11);

⁴⁰ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 92.

⁴¹ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 95.

⁴² Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 100.

⁴³ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 100.

and (3) Include them into our circle of friends (Lev 19:34). Extending hospitality (*philoxenon*⁴⁴) is a way the church can buffer them against tendencies to isolate in their pain of being uprooted. Pamela Buck and Christine Pohl capture its essence as “extending to strangers a quality of kindness usually reserved for friends and family.”⁴⁵ The practice finds its roots in the benevolent God. To him, uprooted people are not invisible:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who ... loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing (Deut 10:17-19 ESV).

The Lord watches over the strangers (Ps 146:9).

For you have been a refuge to the poor, a refuge to the needy in their distress, a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat (Isa 25:4).

In addition to simply modeling godly practice, Peter instructs Christians to “be hospitable to one another without complaining” (1 Pet 4:9). The manner of cheerful service arises against a Scriptural backdrop of reciprocal benefits that occur between host and stranger. Nouwen describes how the stranger carries precious gifts so that the host and guest bring new life to each other. When hostility is converted into hospitality then fearful strangers can become guests revealing to their hosts the promise they are carrying with them. Then the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial, evaporates in the recognition of the new found unity.⁴⁶ Nouwen clarifies that the term is not limited

⁴⁴ Literally, “love of the foreigner or stranger” or “showing love to a stranger.” Colin Brown (ed.), *Dictionary of NT Theology*, Vol 1, 686ff, discusses various NT terms relating to stranger: *xenos* occurs 14 times (e.g. Matt 25:31-46; Luke 13:29; 14:16), *paredpidemos* as “exiles” (*para-* beside + *demos* people) in Heb 11:10, 13; 1 Pet 1:1 and 2:11; Phil 3:20); and *paraoikos* or “alien” (*para* (by) + *oikos* (house)), referring to the non-citizen who lives among citizens (Acts 17:6, 29; 18:16; He 11:9f; 1 Pet 1:17).

⁴⁵ Pamela J. Buck and Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 19.

⁴⁶ Biblical examples of this mutually beneficial relationship between hosts and guests abound. Hebrews 13:2 recalls the visit from angels. Abraham offered them water, bread and a fine calf. The strangers, in turn, gave him an announcement from God that Sarah his wife would give birth to a son (Gen 18:1-15). A widow provided food and shelter to prophet Elijah who, in turn, offered her an abundance of food and raised her son from the dead. Two travelers on the Emmaus Road invited a Stranger into their home and were blessed with eyes to see their Lord as he broke the bread (Luke 24:13-35). In addition, see Melchizedek to Abraham

literally of receiving a stranger into one's house, but is a "fundamental attitude" to other human beings expressed in many different ways.⁴⁷ GRIF has born this out. Hospitality extends to almost every room of our facility nearly on a daily basis.

Messages on hospitality are typically received well, yet for the foreign guests and particularly refugees, they touch something in the heart. They can appreciate more than the rest the life-restoring power it brings to uprooted people desperately longing to connect. Halfway through a message from 1 Peter 4:9, "Be My Guest," a visiting African from the Congo broke out into singular applause and a hearty "Yes, yes!" That service concluded with the congregation forming a giant circle around the sanctuary, a wireless microphone passed from person to person giving a first name followed by the song, "I Need You to Survive." Given our fragmented culture where so many have been uprooted, it is not surprising that Eugene Peterson calls hospitality "the new evangelism for the 21st century."⁴⁸ Indeed, we light the candle of salvation with a match of hospitality. For GRIF, it has been indispensable for embracing our neighbors with the love of Christ. Its obligations and promises seem to encompass the body of Christ in full. Its widespread Christian practice corresponds to this burgeoning societal displacement that will, in some cases, ensure survival and for others enable flourishing.

(Gen 14:18), Lot to the angel (Gen 19:1-11), Abimelech to Abraham (Gen 20:14-15), Laban to Abraham's servant (Gen 24:31) and to Jacob (Gen 29:13-14); Isaac to Abimelech (Gen 26:30), Joseph to his brothers (Gen 43:31-34), Jethro to Moses (Exod 20:20), Rahab to the spies (Josh 2:1-16), David to Mephibosheth (2 Sam 9:7-13), Pharisees to Jesus (Luke 11:37-8), Zacchaeus to Jesus (Luke 19:1-10), Lydia to Paul and Silas (Acts 16:15), Onesiphorus to Paul (2 Tim 1:16), etc. Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (NY: Doubleday, 1975), 50ff.

⁴⁷ Nouwen, *Reaching Out*. Hospitality to Nouwen is one of the answers to a "profoundly simple" question: "What does it mean to live a life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ?" He discusses "creating space for strangers" (65), forms of hospitality (79) and hospitality and the host (101).

⁴⁸ Eugene Peterson quoted by Jeremy Squires, "Connecting Point," *Outreach* (Jan/Feb 2005): 40.

Aesthetic Preparation

Changed Church Name. The mere change of name to “International” became one of the key factors in attracting people from ethnic minorities to our services.⁴⁹ It functioned like a welcome mat saying to this mosaic community, “our church can be your home.”

Displays. New décor with international themes and faces adorn the sanctuary, classrooms, hallways and lobby. On nursery walls are baby pictures from all backgrounds. A matted text of John 3:16 in ten languages prominently hangs in the foyer to ensure that even if guests cannot comprehend our spoken words, they will be able to read the gospel of love in its most distilled verse. Gifted and creative people have captured artistically this magnificent God who shows no partiality.

Two-Directional Sign with LED for Multiple Languages. GRIF sits on a major avenue in the city. An electronic sign beams invitations to events, catching the eye and touching the heart. New arrivals to the USA as well as indigenous minorities often pull into the parking lot hoping to find someone who cares and, ultimately, finding eternal life. Many Bhutanese attend now because a young couple saw the sign and came looking for friends. Many similar incidents speak of people who walk in hoping for a place to belong because of the sign.

⁴⁹ The process: 1. The idea for a new church name was introduced during the pastoral interview as the church's commitment to reach its changing multicultural community. 2. The congregation nominated names through its Sunday School classes. 3. That list was reduced to the top five by a vote of the church Board. A month later, a final vote settled on “Grand Rapids International Fellowship—A Church of the Nazarene.” 4. It was announced to the congregation on Vision Sunday, March 11, 2001, approved by ballot March 18 and legally put into effect Oct 7, 2001. This name commends itself by identifying the local area (“Grand Rapids”), appeals to our growing multiethnic community (“International”), offers a place to belong (“Fellowship”), and remains moored to our church tradition (“A Church of the Nazarene”). “International” avoids trendiness and secures lasting usefulness.

Neighbor Preparation

Neighborhood Survey. As mentioned in Phase 1 canvassing teams were sent into our neighborhoods on two Sunday mornings to learn things about those who are unchurched. This feedback showed us what our neighbors had to say about their reasons for staying home on Sundays. One was busyness, not a big surprise. A close second, however, indicated that many were unaware of a church in the area in which they would be accepted or wanted. In the minds of many, the church existed for the church. From where they sit, their disinterest in the church arose not from boring services but inwardly focused Christians. We must change.⁵⁰

“Adopt a Street” Prayer Walk. In addition to preparing ourselves for our neighbors, we endeavored to prepare our neighbors to be open to God. For the purpose of cultivating spiritual readiness, GRIF members “adopted” sixty-five streets on which we quietly walk and intercede for the well-being of its residents and for greater openness to the gospel.⁵¹

Results. What cumulative effect did these changes make upon the church and its neighbors? Crafting a guiding ideology, aligning ministries, fitting staff to mission, taking in advice from non-Anglos, enlarging our hearts for ethnic minorities through digesting

⁵⁰ Excessive inward focus, we have found, can become a catalyst of change for healthy Christians and congregations. “Boredom,” writes Psychiatrist Richard Winter, “is the self stuffed with self.” Richard Winter, *Still Bored in a Culture of Entertainment: Rediscovering Passion & Wonder* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002). One catalyst toward the MEC vision was variously expressed through a survey of First Church members in 2010 a measure of discontent and, perhaps accompanying boredom, with an inward focus. One of the questions, “What excites you most about this vision?” got this response from Karen T: “The idea of a real get into the streets and make a difference mission. Before much of the ministries within the church were very inward driven.” Another, Sheila H., a middle-aged mother replied, “Change and growth – the status quo was boring, predictable, and bothersome.” Her initial reservation about the vision followed the same theme: “Why would people of a different ethnic background want to attend here? I wasn’t sure I wanted to attend here. Why would anyone else?” A retired senior adult wrote that what excited her most was “that we were willing to step out on faith as a church body into unknown territory believing God to lead.” First Church Member Survey, Winter 2010.

⁵¹ While our goal of adopting 100 streets was far from met, we did see responsiveness from streets that corresponded with the follow-through of faithful intercessory pedestrians. Prayers for receptivity find biblical support in 2 Thess 3:1 (Acts 19:20; 1 Thess 2:13) and for open doors for the gospel (Col 4:2-3; cf. Acts 14:27; 23:11; Phil 1:12-14).

forgotten history, submitting to the eternal Word that binds us as agents of healing, matching décor to mission and, finally, renaming the church to pinpoint focus and breadth – what does this range of preparatory actions say to ourselves and to our community? To ourselves it declares that there is no going back. We are not a church evolving nor developing but a church becoming for the sake of mission. And to our multicultural community, we want it to send a loud and clear message: there is hope for you because here is a church that will go out of its way to make Jesus, the hope of the world, accessible to you.

Finally, on January 20, 2002 Grand Opening Day arrived, marking 92 years after the founding of First Church. Over 10,000 full-color postcard invitations announced Grand Rapids International Fellowship.⁵² The snowstorm that weekend could not erase the excitement of the beginning of a new church era.

PHASE 3: The Church Befriending – Forging Gateways to Worlds in Our Own Back Yard

The central issue of our thesis asks how a homogenously populated congregation can reach out to African and Hispanic Americans and to religious groups of Hindus, Buddhist and Muslims who have immigrated into its community. Phases 1 and 2 examined internal changes we put into place within the church to bring us to readiness. The next two phases take a look at external actions whereby the church engaged its neighbors. Phase 3, the church befriending and Phase 4, the church bearing witness, belong together as complementary solutions for the same challenge. They seek to

⁵² See Appendix 1. We aimed to show why an old church that was not dying is restarting under a new name, namely, because of the gospel of God's love. Elements included greetings from Mayor Bill Hardiman, a salvation testimony, "connecting moments" that highlighted ESL, small groups and children/teens, and a message based on 2 Cor 5:14-19, "Christ's Love Compels: Reasons We Go to the International Community."

match the full range of gospel medicine to the gamut of physical, social and spiritual human need. Thus they advance us to one of our core challenges.

Earnest evangelicals take very seriously Christ's command to witness to their friends and neighbors. But what if they are already in possession of a religious faith such as Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam? How can the gospel be presented to them in way that magnifies Christ, encourages openness and minimizes resistance? Most have committed to memory key passages like Romans 1:16 clearly attesting the gospel's sufficiency of salvation for every believing human being. The issue facing us, however, is not the adequacy of its power but the means of its access. How can that life-changing message get a hearing that becomes embedded in the conscience of our neighbors?

Pulpit Point: Show Them

God calls us to live compassionate lives as an expression of the love of God for suffering people. We must initiate and develop loving, hospitable and compassionate relationships. The overriding theme during this phase was our responsibility to display God's compassion for broken, burdened and oppressed people. Patterned after Jesus, we find two distinguishing aspects of his compassion. First, his initiative shields us against delaying action until "God gives a burden." Jesus was on the move, "going through all the cities and villages...and seeing the people, He felt compassion for them" (Matt 9:35-36 NASB). His devotion propelled motion evoking emotion. That first step of obedience to the Father who sent him seemed most critical. That initial step of obedient mobility, the willingness to go to be with those faced with dire needs, would be vital for us as well. Second, he loved them through a reality-based discernment. Compassion, for Jesus, looked beyond the distressful plight into the dignity of their personhood. "The deeply discerning person brings empathy and care," writes Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. Why is discernment critical to care? Paraphrasing Lewis Smedes, "Only so can we see

behind the status of divorce or homosexuality to discover complex persons who possess gifts greater than their troubles, gifts unseen by the unloving.”⁵³ Applied to GRIF, a discerning compassion sees “refugee” as a status and not as an identity. It looks upon a “foreign immigrant” as an interesting human being. Rao, a precious brother and friend who moved to Grand Rapids from India and later came to Christ, expressed it this way. What moved him to Christ was “not because you took pity on us, but because you loved us.”⁵⁴ Jesus avoided equating a person’s worth with his/her station in life. The sting felt by Jesus came in the incongruity between divine image bearers and the indignities placed upon them. They themselves were precious sheep without a shepherd and thus vulnerable to rough hands instead of helpful ones. We too then must serve the ethnic minority or refugee who has lost everything by employing both aspects – showing initiative by going to them and viewing them with dignity and not as people who are in the least bit inferior to those American-born citizens.

Pitfalls of Distance

Social Isolation from Other Cultural Groups without a Connecting Plan

Once the biblical groundwork was laid, the new sign was up, this pitfall loomed large. Most of us did not even know the name of a Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim. Others had no friends from the African-American or Hispanic communities. We ran in circles that looked like ourselves. “We have no friendships with people outside of ‘our kind.’ How do we find them and, once identified, meaningfully connect with them?” The initial reservation facing most of us was expressed by Karen, “How can it possibly come about? Nobody I know really knows anyone from another culture.” Another lay leader

⁵³ Lewis B. Smedes, *A Pretty Good Person* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 124; quoted in Cornelius Plantinga, Jr., *Breviary of Sin*, 117.

⁵⁴ Rao I., public testimony at GRIF, October 24, 2010.

asked, "Where will we find these people from different backgrounds and, once we do, how can we build bridges of love to them?" Our challenge became obvious: How can we forge new paths with people in need of Christ's love and cross social borders to initiate new friendships?

Pathways to Meaningful Connection

This thesis contends that the multiethnic church (MEC) becomes the pathway to reaching our religiously pluralistic neighbors for Christ rather than the product of that endeavor. Such, however, was not our original approach. In search for an answer to our central question, we first envisioned a roadmap looking something like this: First, church members would engage in cross-cultural evangelism cast in an amiable apologetic framework. Many would be convinced of the gospel, believe its message, repent, be baptized and finally enfolded into the warmth of the fellowship. By this process, hues in the congregation would gradually resemble those of its neighbors and close the stark gap that had widened over time. Such, however, has not been the case. During this ten year period, we have seen the reverse. Rather than evangelism leading to incorporation into the faith community, it has been congregational incorporation opened through relational compassionate involvement which has stimulated interest in Christ.

Our approach has been a combined gospel witness of show and tell. Paul was exemplary in this practice and succinctly described it in 1 Thessalonians 2:8 (NIV): "We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us." This double sharing of the "gospel of God" and "our lives as well" takes evangelism beyond distributing literature describing the gospel to life involvement illustrating it. This layered sharing of life and truth may be captured with the metaphor of the velvet-covered brick. The weight of truth is "the gospel of God" (brick) which alone brings salvation to fallen human beings (Rom

1:16; 1 Cor 1:18, 20; 2:12, 14; 3:6; 4:4-6; 1 Thess 1:5; 2:13; Heb 4:12-13). But bare bricks are hard, unbending and scratchy. The gospel, likewise, minces no words about divine judgment over sin before offering the broken Body for the sinner in mercy. Wrapping the brick in velvet ("our lives") trims none of its weight while gaining an appearance, inviting fallen humans to come and see, to rub against it and hope. When the Apostle of the Nations wrapped "the gospel of God in "our very lives" in a caring relationship "because you have become so dear to us" he was not building a new template but copying an existing one: "The Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). Jesus embodied divine truth for a purpose: to make an invisible God conspicuous so that fallen human beings could see his glory, the essential qualities of his grace and truth. For what end? The weight of truth changes lives (brick) and loving involvement of Spirit-filled believers opens the spirit to receive that truth (velvet). Examples of the gospel wrapped in human affection about in the ministry of Paul (1 Thess 2:7-8, 11-12; cf. 2 Cor 1:5 9; 1:21; 2:4, 15, 17; 3:5, 12, 18; 4:1; 2 Tim 2:24-6). As Jesus did not come to do apologetics but to reveal glory, his astonishing life created such curiosity that questions became inevitable. Should it not be so with us?

The goal of this dual witness is this. Once they see the love [velvet] and hear the gospel of God [brick], they can draw a conclusion and, by the Holy Spirit, reach a moment of truth, an "aha" moment. One example is a Vietnamese Buddhist named Anna. She no longer attends GRIF but this is what happened. A mother in her thirties, she came to our midweek English Language Learners class (ELL). This night is designed to teach English and make friends. Approximately half of its 80-100 students come from Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim backgrounds. The curriculum draws from secular sources rather than biblical or Christian. However, we offer these students opportunities for recreation (trips to the lake, parks, etc.) and a Bible study that meets on Sunday

mornings. To become more fluent in English, Anna started attending the Sunday morning class. On Sundays, students first sit through the worship service until they are dismissed to the “International English Bible Study” that meets during the message. Ending at the same time the service dismisses, Anna and I would often exchange greetings afterwards in the hallway. After three weeks of class, she came up and declared with a smile, “Pastor, one God! I learn in class today!” And I replied, “Great, Anna, yes, there is only one God.” Again, the following week she came with a bigger smile and said “I believe in Jesus!” I replied, “Wow, that’s great Anna. But you are a Buddhist. How can you believe in Jesus? Would you explain what you mean?”

Overflowing with excitement and eager to talk, we stepped into the secretary’s office. I sat at a table and she took a sheet of paper and, with a pencil, drew a straight vertical line down the middle. She wrote the number 10 at the top and 1 at the bottom. She then drew short evenly spaced horizontal bars across the vertical line and the number 5 halfway up. She explained. “In Vietnam, everybody is a number. People love only those who are the same number as themselves. If you are a 5, you never talk to someone who is an 8 or a 3. You treat people by their number. That’s why I never understood GRIF. Even when nobody knew me, I’m just a Vietnamese woman, only a 1, but they treat me like I was a 10. Why do they love me? Today I learned why. In class, Jesus loved everybody same. He didn’t have numbers. He died for me. Now I know why GRIF loves me. Because of Jesus!”

Anna’s epiphany came after she made connections. The truth she saw preceded the truth she heard. The gospel was the weight of truth, of course, that brought her to saving faith. But it was the human touch that opened her spirit and stimulated interest in that message. She came to GRIF seeing herself as only an anonymous tiny Vietnamese woman in a big crowd. The truth she saw, however, was that she is a 10 in God’s eyes, a valued and redeemable human being. While she enjoyed being fussed over, this

personal attention seemed strange and piqued her interest. The very peculiarity of that love brought the invisible God out into the open and, in turn, caused her to ask why. Upon hearing the story of Christ, the gospel of truth, she put sight and sound together. The Holy Spirit used the combined weight of truth and the love of God passing through his people to launch her journey with Christ.

In the current phase we will identify the actions GRIF has taken to adorn the gospel [velvet] and in Phase 4 we will point out the venues GRIF has taken to communicate the gospel [brick].

Asked the Right Question

The two most commonly heard reservations we were all feeling at the onset of this journey were “why” and “how.” Jeff framed the quandary. Looking over a congregation of practically all white faces, he asked, “Why would people of different ethnic background want to attend here?” We were strategically stumped. Lucy, a senior adult, raised a concern heard frequently: “I couldn’t imagine ‘how’ to accomplish such a huge undertaking.” We typically asked something like, “How will we get people of different cultures and religious backgrounds through our front door?” Following closely behind was a second question, “What kind of service will attract them?” It is not that those questions are unimportant, but they were premature. The flaw in our thinking resided in our unrealistic expectation. We were looking at bringing redemption without doing incarnation.⁵⁵ We formed an assumption that people from those cultures would be attracted by a new name and attractive services. What if the draw for them, however, was not the service at all? What if the ache in their heart was not for inspiring music but for a place to belong, to be safe in a foreign country, a place to connect with family? It

⁵⁵ Paul T. Martindale added, “There can be no resurrection until after incarnation and crucifixion,” Thesis submission, Chapter 6, August 2010.

became necessary to change our question from a self-serving “How do we get our neighbors through our doors?” to what might be called the Good Samaritan question, “How can we be a good neighbor?” That is, who lies wounded on the margins and is being ignored by decent people? For our international and multicultural neighborhood, that person was the lonely refugee who needed to learn English, to have a friend or to find empowerment in their new home. To help us identify what needs were not being met and avoid duplicating what is already being carried out by other organizations, two staff members met with leaders from 25 social organizations and public school administrators and teachers to find out what needs are not being adequately addressed.⁵⁶

Previously GRIF had sponsored two refugee families, one from Bosnia and the other from Vietnam. We learned that a more widespread need was a growing number of refugees who had already arrived and passed their six months of agency assistance. These were falling through the cracks, becoming isolated, and in many cases without English fluency. So rather than assisting only two families in their resettlement, as important as that is, we offered adult English classes with free childcare, something not available in West Michigan. On top of that, we had determined that we will only do what fosters relationship. For GRIF must not become an agency where people drop in, pick up their goods and leave. We are a community, the body of Christ and must show them Jesus. The interactive venue of English learning fits this well. Forming friendships between tutors and students is easy and natural. GRIF’s Wednesday night English Language Learners (ELL) class has been the main driver for our international ministry. Out of it have spun day classes, outings, Bible studies, meals, and many venues for friendship.

⁵⁶ For example, we discovered in this process that a nearby Presbyterian church already had an excellent food bank, so we closed ours and supported theirs. The same occurred with our Day Care as discussed earlier.

Formed a Non-Profit, GRIF CommunityLink

Later, after GRIF had begun to significantly touch the lives of our neighbors through refugee resettlement and English classes, it formed a non-profit 501c3, CommunityLink (CL), to serve as GRIF's arm of compassion into our neighborhood. Its official purpose is written as follows:

Compelled by faith in Jesus Christ and God's call to "do justice" CommunityLink works in partnership with other service providers to assist individuals in our multicultural community achieve self-sufficiency. By providing educational and relational support, CommunityLink will live out Christ's commandment to love God and our neighbors. Following Christ's example, people will be served regardless of their heritage or beliefs.⁵⁷

CommunityLink has experienced dramatic expansion of refugee assistance simply due to the explosive growth of this population. It represents both adults and children who have fled from persecution, war, famine and extreme poverty. Some of its services include classes on everyday English and English for the workplace. Also through cultural orientation, adjustment services and life skill training they become oriented to life in the U.S. Its logo below captures a desire that those enduring significant loss will find Christ's compassion, hope and empowerment.

Fig. 1. GRIF CommunityLink Logo



⁵⁷ "GRIF CommunityLink Non-Profit Corporation By-laws," Article 2. For a complete description of services, see www.grifcommunitylink.org.

Interceded in Prayer at Critical Junctures

God cuts new channels, unexpected ones, and our major advances have followed periods of spiritual searching and concerted prayer. A few examples will illustrate. On the afternoon of that fateful September 11, 2001 a group of pastors gathered in a living room to ask for God's direction during this national crisis. The Spirit sent an unmistakable signal, prompting this author to place a call to the Imam at the local mosque in Grand Rapids, Dr. Sahibzada, with whom a friendship had already begun. The words to say to him came with unusual clarity. Simply, ask for his permission to address the Muslim community in that Friday's service with these words. First, that we do not hold you responsible for the attack on the Twin Towers; second, that our church commits to pray for the safety of you and your families from any reprisals; and third, we would be honored if the Muslim community would accept our invitation to dinner this coming Sunday (9/16) at our gymnasium. After his initial reluctance, the Imam gave his blessing, somewhat pessimistically because of the pervasive fear that had seized the Muslim community. That Friday service was somber but true to his promise he let me address the men present. As a result, that following Sunday 35 nervous Muslim guests drove into our parking lot and entered a gym full of equally nervous Christian hosts. Everyone was instructed that at each round table both Muslims and Christians would sit, that the food line would alternate families starting with Muslims and we would all follow one rule. This is a time to make friends, not discuss theology. We are eager to hear about your countries, your families and how you are faring in America. After a blessing over the meal was offered "in your holy name" within moments there came a sense to many of us bringing with it collective astonishment. From this pastor's perspective, divine love descended into that gymnasium like an invisible blanket, visibly banishing fear, relieving stiffness and began to loosen fluent conversations and sounds of laughter. Looking back now on this event, just one week after 9/11, it was astonishing. Since that

time, my wife and I have been in several Muslim homes and the Imam remains a good friend for whose salvation I still pray. The point here is that at critical times, through intercessory prayer, God led us in ways and places where no prior trail had existed.

Two years ago during one of our monthly extended staff meetings, our devotional study focused on the Antioch church which by the Spirit had sent Paul and Silas on a highly successful mission venture. Progress, however, came to a standstill. Doors closed. Paul has a dream about a man from Macedonia who begs and pleads for them to come to his country. Indeed, they did and saw astounding results. After reading, we asked ourselves, who is begging GRIF to come and help? Who is the next people group that God wants to touch through GRIF? We could not think of anyone. We prayed that day asking God to make it clear to us. An extraordinary thing occurred two Sundays following. As my wife, Pam, and I exited the front doors a family of three had just rounded the corner of the building looking for someone. When they saw us, their faces brightened and seemed relieved.

Hello, my name is Krishna, this is Radikha and our daughter, Ashmita. We are Bhutanese who have been in a refugee camp in Nepal for the last 18 years. We have been released and just ten days ago moved into Traditions Apartments. We have been in our apartment. We have no friends and are so lonely. But today as we were walking we saw your sign that said 'international' and were so happy. Would you come to our apartment and visit with us?

The past two years GRIF has been privileged to welcome scores of these precious people from Bhutan. They attend services faithfully and are coming to learn who Jesus is in relation to the gods they have known. Rarely in three decades of ministry has this pastor witnessed the *missio Dei* quite like this. In this case, the critical juncture occasioning the intercession was a particular Scripture. Upon reflection one wonders if this is a matter of God answering a specific prayer or inspiring one. Either way, it engenders profound gratitude that God includes the church in his mission!

Even in the face of violence, God has overcome and opened avenues to faith. Krishna, mentioned above, was jumped and beaten by three thugs at his apartment after he returned home from work late one night. Pummeled badly, he was hospitalized and released with soreness and bruises. The word got around and sent fear throughout their apartments. Violence and loud profanity was becoming too common. In response, GRIF organized prayer teams and asked people to go to these apartments to casually stroll and silently pray. Many of us used the Lord's Prayer as a prayer guide, asking that God's reign of love, light, and peace to dispel the darkness over that place. We also covered other complexes in the area where violent episodes had come to our attention. A few months later one of the Bhutanese young men told a friend that he had regretted moving to the USA because of the frightening violence. The old refugee camp seemed safer and he wanted to return. He went on to say, however, that since the church had started its prayer walks, there had been no further incidences of violence and that the troublemakers had all moved out! He changed his mind and was glad they had moved. In his heart, Christ is stirring new faith. What men intended for evil God used for good. Again, intercessory prayer at critical moments has played a key role in forming this MEC.

As we enter the second decade for GRIF, the newly elected church Board walked throughout our building to rededicate it to God. Eva Schoon who facilitated this moving experience directed us to the foyer. Half of the members were asked to remove their shoes and stand just outside the door as we prayed that God would make our entry ways holy ground so that people who are desperate, lonely, or broken would feel the love of Christ as they enter. Soon afterwards a Chinese college student had arrived in the U.S. during the previous week. He wanted to visit GRIF and requested a ride. He had become a Christian just a year earlier through a house church of university students in Singapore. Accompanying him was another new Chinese student who was not a believer. It was Labor Day weekend. After picking them up, I had concerns that greeters

would be in short supply and our guests might be made to feel like outsiders. Once arriving, however, there was nothing to worry about. Standing at the doors that morning were Burmese teenage girls who had arrived only a few weeks earlier and had been recruited to greet by Num Te, a distinguished Burmese woman. The nervousness of our Chinese guests visibly drained away at sight of the smiles on the innocent faces of these girls. By the time these guests had found a seat they had met at least fifteen people in the foyer from six or seven different countries who warmly engaged them. The intercessory focus in this case was a specific place rather than a critical incident. Through it, a foyer became holy ground, a place where vital connections of divine love regularly take place.

This work of cross-cultural ministry is often arduous but, through the Spirit, not grievous. Those involved in this ministry have participated more out of a sense of divine calling to people rather than to a church program. We must not overlook the role of the Holy Spirit to call individuals to specific areas. For example, Dawn, a busy wife and mother prayed at the start of the year, asking God to help her prioritize her schedule. She is still just as busy as before, but has been helping Bhutanese find jobs, connecting with agencies with extraordinary results. She does not feel like it is an imposition. God has filled her.

Forged Gateways of Compassion

Kids Hope. Through “Kids Hope” many of our adults touch the lives of elementary age children who are struggling to succeed in school due to severe hardships and often the lack of positive adult role models. GRIF has “adopted” an elementary school where several adults meet one on one each week for one hour with a child. Lucy, a senior adult, has met with Pomeran for several years who is now a young teen who received Christ and was baptized. This service has opened innumerable doors

of serving single moms, advocacy, friendship, and providing for children attention, encouragement, accountability, care and Christ's love from a responsible adult.

Hospitality – Care for Refugees. Care for refugees took the form of biblical hospitality. The Bible calls the church to practice hospitality or “love of the foreigner” or “stranger.”⁵⁸ GRIF has endeavored to practice the three aspects of loving strangers in the following ways.

Advocacy and Protection. Believers are instructed to offer the foreigner protection from exploitation. “When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong” (Lev 19:33 ESV). “You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner...” (Deut 24:17 ESV). And a third from Deuteronomy 24:14-15 (ESV): “You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is ...one of the sojourners... You shall give him his wages on the same day, before the sun sets (for he is poor and counts on it), lest he cry against you to the Lord, and you be guilty of sin.” Refugees are vulnerable in a foreign land. On the week that Krishna, mentioned above, was hospitalized after being badly beaten his wife, Radhika, was demeaned by a major automobile dealership as witnessed by one of our members. Chandra was hung up on by his case worker after pleading with her for half an hour. Prior to this a young quiet Burmese teen was badly beaten when riding home after work late at night on his bicycle. A young Burmese woman has been assaulted multiple times in her apartment. African and African American men and women alike experience discrimination and harsh treatment on a regular basis. What can we do?

First, we protect refugees by empowering them with American life skills so they can stand on their own. Through GRIF CommunityLink in collaboration with other agencies we can help them get started in this country. For example, through Bethany

⁵⁸ See Appendix 4 for definitions of immigrant and refugee.

Christian Services some of our professionals are involved in the American Orientation Class each Monday night so they can learn about banking, grocery stores, kitchen skills, police protocol and other important information to help them settle in their new country. In addition, good automobile mechanics at GRIF help them buy worthy cars and evaluate the deals both from mechanical and financial prospective.

English fluency is one of the greatest needs of all foreigners. Ten years ago Donna, a specialist and speech therapist, skillfully launched this ministry with only a handful of students. Combining her expertise and compassion, she built a solid reputation that gave this ministry a foundation of credibility. When circumstances took her away it left a difficult vacancy to fill. Six years ago Marsha, a newly retired public school science teacher was asked by Eva to consider this position. She balked, claiming no experience teaching English to Americans, much less foreigners. In her words, she did not even like people that much. She was asked to pray and, by doing so, her initial reluctance gave way to prayerful obedience.⁵⁹ Out of her availability has emerged weekly English classes for adults in West Michigan that are thriving, joyous, educational and friendship-building. Every Wednesday students stream to class from over 20 countries. English education often integrates with scientific experiments that involves the class in a way that is interactive with GRIF volunteers. In addition to the class, extra-curricular outings are planned for additional friendship building. This now is called English Language Learners (ELL). This ministry has driven GRIF's services to international people. Some senior adults work outside of class to provide English tutoring in some of their homes during the week. Because of the demand, GRIF also opens its building every weekday to over 100 English students who are taught by competent staff of a local Christian agency.

⁵⁹ Marsha's recollection of this decision and its subsequent impact on her are included in this chapter's conclusion section.

Another way we empower is with job assistance. This takes the form of helping them find jobs, providing transportation and assisting them in the hiring process, filling out necessary papers, applications, W2's, personnel forms, etc. Also, new arrivals from outside the U.S. bring with them customs that can be misunderstood and conflict in with the work place. We have appealed to supervisors to restore jobs when the foreigner's actions were misinterpreted as stealing or lying. When a Bosnian was fired for alleged roughness, one of our pastors went to the company to reason with the CEO, explaining that the man in question is a peaceful man who had been provoked. Language was a barrier to defending himself. Not only did the CEO rehire him, but because of the man's exceptional job performance, the CEO later promoted him as a leading supervisor in that steel plant.

Other ways to empower is when a foreigner "gets taken" by a business they often need someone fluent in English to be their mouthpiece. A national computer chain refused refunding money after selling a broken computer to a Bhutanese man until a local GRIF resident intervened. Advocacy also takes the form of accompanying foreigners to US Immigration offices and the DHS, assisting the green cards and citizenship tests. In addition, filling out forms for taxes, job applications, personnel papers, contracts and patient information in emergency rooms and doctors offices. Those with legal skills often read and explain contracts to make sure that they fully understand implications, terms, expectations, and opportunities.

Provision. Second, believers are called to share their goods with foreigners. Deuteronomy 24:19-21 commands believers to assist foreigners with their basic needs out of our wealth of goods and experiences.

When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it. It shall be for the sojourner...When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over them again. It shall be for the sojourner...When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not strip it afterward. It shall be for the sojourner... (ESV)

When refugees arrive in Grand Rapids through a sponsoring agency they are on State support for the first six months. It is imperative for them to learn English and get hired. If these do not occur, their situation can reach levels of despairing destitution. Sometimes many arrive at the same time. It becomes extremely difficult for social agencies to provide adequate care and becomes an opportunity for the church. A large group from Burma arrived in January with only tee-shirts, jeans and flip-flops. The church brought in winter coats, boots, shoes, gloves and scarves for the bitter Michigan weather. Often they do not tell us their needs unless we ask because they do not want to be a bother. Many physical needs such as clothing, furniture, groceries have been purchased for several families. Sometimes DHS has fallen through with Food Stamps and people have stepped in. Others assist their children with school supplies, donate tax help, given phone cards as gifts, donated computers and, of even greater importance, through our ITT specialists, gave many hours getting them working and connected. Doctors and medically trained specialists have provided accurate information to refugees when news from home comes about sick loved ones. Upon the death of Toyin's mother in Nigeria, money was collected by their small group to provide the fare for her and her husband to attend the burial. One of the their group members took in and cared for their four children during their three-week absence. Steve, a real estate agent has helped families from India, Bosnia and Bhutan in finding affordable homes once they get settled and want to build equity. Parents want to know from responsible local residents the pros and cons of this or that school. Marsha and others have helped look at the schools for young kids or even for college.

Include with Family and Friends. Third, the biblical command goes beyond protecting uprooted people against exploitation and rescuing them from destitution. It also instructs Christians to alleviate their aching loneliness by socially including them. Leviticus 19:34 (NIV) exhorts, "The alien living with you must be treated as one of your

native-born. Love him as yourself ... I am the LORD your God." Treating strangers as family members recognizes their precious value as human beings. Embracing them at this level reminds them and us that they are more than recipients of State benefits, but people dignified with the stamp of the *imago Dei*. In doing so, every ounce of honor drained out by totalitarian governments, genocide or religious abuse begins to replenish and slowly return to previous full-lines. Emotional support through including strangers into our circle of friends and family is beyond calculation. Chandra, a highly educated Bhutanese nutritionist, along with his family of seven had been forced to uproot to live in the squalor of a Nepali refugee camp because of state-sponsored brutality. After seventeen years they were released to Grand Rapids. Speaking of the adjustments encountered upon the arrival of his family to the U.S.A., he explained: "It was overwhelming. You are bombarded with so much change. The United States has good systems, but everything is different. I felt such tension, stress. I don't know how we could have made it without having the support from the church."⁶⁰

What are some of the ways that we include them as part of our family? First, by showing interest in the things they value such as their cultural celebrations. Examples include naming ceremonies for births, death remembrances and weddings. On a Hindu baby's first birthday parents take him/her to the temple for the Rite of Infant Blessing. We were surprised when Krishna and Radhika brought their little boy, Assal, and requested that this be done instead at church in a public service. The family brought the baby to the platform similarly to the way Christian parents bring their infants to be dedicated. While its meaning was clearly distinguished from that rite, we read how Jesus blessed children, touching them with holy and loving hands. After explaining the meaning of

⁶⁰ Expressed in conversation at his home on Thanksgiving Day, Nov 25, 2010. Another immigrant, Rolfe Beerhorst, 85, a long-time GRIF member who moved to the U.S.A. from the Netherlands soon after WWII, identified the thing that GRIF got right was, "Homes and doors were opened and the immigrants were welcomed by the people of our church." First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

blessing, we laid hands on the boy's shoulders,⁶¹ asking God to bless him so that he might grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men and that he would come to know the source of all blessings in the name of Jesus.

Like families, long trips are often taken together. Six GRIF members took a trip to India to visit the home of Rao and Lucky just to share their country, meet their families and learn their culture. Jeff and Sheila invited a Vietnamese teenage girl with them on a cross-country vacation to accompany their daughter. One woman gave up her spring break to take a group of Bhutanese and their children to see family members who have resettled in Rochester, NY. The same woman took a Bosnian couple to St. Louis to visit a cousin.

Enfolding them into our family circles and friendships sometimes comes in the form of becoming surrogate family members. The role as mother, sister, brother, father has been filled by so many. Eva is grandma and mom to several young mothers and has been in the birthing rooms with four new mothers. Marsha Tester is grandma to Jay, Missy is sister to Lucky. Evelyn, a Filipino, adopted a young mother from India, Laksmi, as her own daughter. The list goes on.

We invite them to our celebrations and share our culture. They attend our baptisms. They participate in our holidays such as Christmas and Thanksgiving as well as birthdays and showers. Eva and her husband, the late David Schoon, invited the Vo family from Vietnam with Buddhist background into their home during the Christmas season.⁶² Eva placed a Nativity set on a table and acted out Luke's account of the Christmas story with Nativity characters. The family was captivated by their first hearing

⁶¹ Some Asian cultures consider touching the head of a child to be offensive.

⁶² Our first contact with the Vo family was when they lived adjacent to the church. Eva embraced them immediately and met with the mother for one hour a week for six weeks. That led to a special relationship with the entire family lasting many years. Just before David's passing at Hospice last year, they stood, cried and said goodbye.

of this unusual story of wonder. Those children have all become part of GRIF's children and teen groups. Asian American teens bring many precious gifts but also face challenges living in the U.S. Having received Christ they find guidance in their faith through Eva, teen sponsors and a church family.

A service of anointing was offered for people who have experienced significant loss (Isa 61:1-3; Mark 6:34; Jas 5:15-16). The warm countenances of our Sudanese families could easily allow their traumatic pasts that remain alive in their memories to go undetected. They volunteer details reluctantly and sparingly. A Sudanese husband simply made this understatement, "We have all suffered great losses." Several were anointed. Memorial services have been provided for Sudanese and Nigerians who are separated from families. Several attend our small group Bible studies to learn about Christianity and have a place to belong.

It has been my experience that it is often more important for me to be in their home, eating at their table, than for them to be in mine. By entering their homes we see the one thing many have been able to keep with them as they fled for their lives: family pictures. It is an honor remembering with them the good things of their culture.

Most of all, they invite us to join them in their homes for meals. They love being part of GRIF potlucks and the fact that we want to eat their food brings delight to all. Dining together among a broad range of cultures, we have learned, calls for three things: a diverse smorgasbord of food choices, pluralistic freedom and, perhaps the most challenging, intentional integration. Tables are typically marked as "vegetarian," "chicken," "beef" and "pork" (or, more importantly, "No pork"). Pluralistic freedom means showing respect for individual dietary scruples without infringing upon the freedom of other groups.⁶³ We have not experienced resistance to serving pork at church gatherings

⁶³ The counsel of Romans 14:2-4, 14-15, esp. 17-21 remains practical in an MEC.

as long as foods are clearly marked and viable choices are provided. Muslims prepare their own meat and are always eager to share it with others. Mixing people from different backgrounds happens naturally with some, but for most, it requires intentionality.

To summarize, GRIF wraps its message with velvet through teaching English, eating together, hugging their children, playing together, sometimes with some frolic to allow the broken a place to laugh again and feel human, praying over them. It does not take much. The minutest inklings expressing Christ's love and compassion are often received with such grateful abandon by those who hunger for new beginnings and authentic connections.

Human presence alone is an insufficient solution to the pitfall of social distance. It is the Holy Spirit within believers who emits the glory of God. That is incarnation: "we have seen his [Christ's] glory" (John 1:14). It is vital that our lives must be different, characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, longsuffering and all the other fruit. This is why prayer precedes visits so that it is Christ who is shining.

GRIF seeks to build a culture where strangers are valued and included. Up to the current time, the local demands of refugees have required most of our attention. Yet it also include indigenous minorities as well.

The compensations flowing back into GRIF defy human calculation. A young mother from Mexico named Rosa began attending English class. When a fire broke out in the house she was staying forced her to relocate, a GRIF family took her and her two daughters in until they could find permanent housing. The family's witness taught her about the differences Christ has made in her life. Eventually, Rosa began coming to church and became a believer. She came and asked for her baby to be dedicated. The father, Rafael, who also attended ELL wanted to have part in the ceremony but he was not a believer. I met with him and explained to him reasons parents must be genuine believers to dedicate their child. The gospel was shared and Rafael made a genuine

commitment. To make a long story short, Rafael and Rosa got married, were baptized and then we dedicated their baby. Soon after, they purchased an uninhabitable home and needed a place to stay for the six months that would be required for Rafael to repair it. They came to live with my family during that time. Rafael stated as they moved to their own home, “You are not friends. You are family for life.” Indeed, they are now family, not just friends.

PHASE 4: The Church Bearing Witness – Offering the Good News

GRIF’s mission is not to become a multicultural church. It is, rather, “to connect people in our multicultural community to Jesus Christ...” At this stage many of us who had originally voiced concerns about our lack of social connections with anyone from ethnic or religious groups other than our own, were caught by surprise. Now we found ourselves flush with acquaintances and friends from other cultures, countries and religions. A long-time GRIF member expressed this widespread astonishment:

My biggest surprise was that God seemed to open the floodgates. We thought how could we possibly reach out to people we don't yet know, and they started arriving on our doorstep literally in droves.⁶⁴

For another, the surprise came in “how fast the church changed.” Friendship building across cultural lines, we learned, is not as difficult as we had imagined.⁶⁵ Now we must tackle issues of Christian witness in a pluralist context. How do English students pursuing U.S. citizenship make the journey into the kingdom of God? Can people with allegiances to Vishnu, Krishna, Buddha or the prophet Muhammad come to saving faith in Christ? Should they?⁶⁶ Showing hospitality by protecting, providing and including

⁶⁴ Karen T., First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

⁶⁵ Bobbi B., a GRIF senior adult member, identified her biggest surprise in the GRIF journey: “the church became international so quickly, because of many nations present in the congregation.” First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

⁶⁶ See chapter 3.

them in our circle of friends is one thing; sharing the gospel of Christ, we have learned, is another.

PULPIT POINT: Tell Them

We must do more than show them; we must tell them the good news. Otherwise, “How will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher?” (Rom 10:14 NASB). By simply showing them the love of God, we become like a suspense writer who leaves off the last chapter, cheating them of the plot and leave them to their ultimate fate. The gospel alone carries the power of salvation. Paul was not a recent seminary graduate brimming with optimism but a seasoned missionary to the nations when he wrote, “Therefore, let it be known to you that this saving work of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will listen!” (Acts 28:28 HCSB).

Evangelistic Pitfalls

Justice without evangelism

We are eager to help but hesitant to speak. Is Christian engagement in acts of justice without voicing evangelistic witness justifiable? In light of their religious allegiances, it becomes easy for us to discuss safe topics but not saving ones.

Perplexed by Religious Pluralism

Some expressed concerns of pushing them away or offending them, given their current religious devotion. Reasons for evangelical silence are usually left unsaid. Undoubtedly, many are bewildered by their surrounding pluralist milieu, unsure how to begin to reach across religious lines. Dawn expressed it this way, “How can it be done? Will we unknowingly insult or alienate them by our lack of knowledge of their culture?” For her, theological preparedness on the part of church leaders brought assurance:

“Joe’s knowledge and study, as well as his teaching series about world religions helped us to feel that our leadership had ideas and was knowledgeable and would be able to direct our paths.”⁶⁷

Is Evangelism in a Pluralist Culture Arrogant?

An adult Sunday School class in which this writer was teaching announced a new study was beginning on the relationship of the gospel to the religions for the purpose of witnessing to our pluralistic world. Following the class, one of the students took me aside and said, “My wife and I are against taking this direction. It is arrogant to push our beliefs on other people.” Many would identify with him. Who is not repulsed by anything that smacks of arrogance or bigotry? Are we being arrogant to present Christ as exclusive Savior and Lord in this context of rival faith claims?

Will they Want it?

How does the Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim become interested in the gospel of Christ? The enemy of the gospel is not other religions or their devout souls. The culprit in chief is Satan whose primary device is misrepresentation (Gen 3; 2 Cor 4:6). But no one is completely impervious to the plain message of the gospel.

Fear of Theological Syncretism

A member of the church Board expressed a concern that “they will import foreign ideas from other religions into our church.” The question might be asked how a church can bring in international people without the deities that come with them. Is there a spiritual firewall that allows people in but blocks entry of unwanted gods?

⁶⁷ Dawn C., unpublished reflections on this ten year journey written to the author, June 2010.

Evangelistic Pathways

Some of the ways that GRIF has endeavored to communicate the gospel are as follows.

Lifestyle Witness – Velvet-Covered Brick

The story of Anna in the previous phase illustrating the velvet-covered brick motif is not isolated. She is not alone in making a connection between seeing and hearing truth. Many have not yet received Christ, but they do make connections. In this context, verbal witness becomes natural.

Two brothers from Somalia, Abdulahi and Abdruman, Muslim young men in their early twenties came to English for the first three years. One night Abdulahi asked what a “volunteer” was. After defining it as someone who serves people free of charge, this writer pointed to the others sitting in the large room that were helping the students and said, “just like all of us.” It became obvious that he and his brother were caught off guard. “What? You don’t get paid for this? Then why do you do it?” The boys, visibly moved, replied “There are no volunteers in our country.” That conversation marked a slight shift to more gratitude and openness. The gospel later presented to them was received politely but not internally.

Lyla, a volunteer lead English teacher at GRIF as well as a public school teacher, hosted a dinner for about 10 women from English class in her home. One of those attending was Nu Te [“new-TAY”] from Burma, a woman of dignity in her culture. While riding home with my wife, Pam, Nu Te tactfully steered the conversation to raise this question: “Americans are very busy people. They are professional. But some who are very busy still spend a lot of time taking care of us. [several names were mentioned]. May I ask you why do you give us your time?” Pam, after silently praying for an answer, made this reply. “Nu Te, we know that God loves us and gave Jesus to us. We also

believe that God loves you as much as he loves us. His love for us takes time, he is patient with us. We can't just see you in the halls at church. That is not enough. It takes time to love like God loves." Now the truth she had seen finds clarity in the truth she hears. As a result, this strong woman was brought to tears. Simple actions done in love through the Spirit accompanied by a clarifying lens of gospel truth, even in morsels, carry enormous weight. Nu Te has become a faithful greeter at GRIF and recruits many Burmese to join her.

When *Jesus Films* were freely distributed in our English class, some Muslims refused to take one. One particular woman was emphatic. "No, we're Muslims!" That initial resistance to the film was overcome by seeing the gospel illustrated through English class conversations, outings and visits outside of class. She then took the film. "I watched it and my husband, Muhammad, did too!" The crucifixion of Christ portrayed there so vividly, an event they have been led to believe is a fiction, is now indelibly imprinted on their minds. The point is, the velvet of actions of Spirit-filled believers creates a new openness to the gospel.

Evangelism Training: Witnessing Tools for a Pluralist Culture

Mentors from English class have the most interaction with those from Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim backgrounds. Presenting the gospel across religious fences carries with it some unique nuances. They were trained in "Thumbs Up, Thumbs Down Approaches to Communicating with those of a Different Religion," a lesson based upon 2 Corinthians 4:1-7. Two methods that Christians should avoid became of the way they distort truth or alienate one's neighbor were balanced with three commendable approaches for their biblical faithfulness and relational integrity.

From the pulpit we used Paul's Mars Hill message in Acts 17 to debunk charges of arrogance against Christians who hold to the unique superiority of Jesus in a pluralist

society. This message by Paul is especially useful for presenting a Christian worldview beginning at creation and concluding with final judgment. Its invitation is poignant in the way it joins one divine command to five essentials characteristics of God. Issues pertaining to Hindus, Buddhists and Islam all are addressed in this message.

Just Walk Across the Room. While Bill Hybel's training, *Just Walk Across the Room*,⁶⁸ is not narrowly targeting cross-cultural or interfaith issues, its principles have wide application. Personal testimonies are compelling through its videos. Sunday messages dovetailed with this small group study.

International English Bible Study. In contrast to our midweek English class which uses secular curriculum, this class presents themes from the Bible for those whose first language is other than English. It meets on Sundays during the morning message. In the past we have used very good studies on Mark, John and other biblical books. Currently we use a Chronological Bible Study with 35 biblical stories.

Jesus Film. Copies of the *Jesus Film* in the languages represented in our ELL were distributed to the class. Only a few refused to take one. It can be used in many different settings. It also has an updated revision of its Jesus Film ESL class. GRIF has not come close to using this to its potential.

Repackaged Jesus Message Series. Through this pre-Easter series experiment, "The Repackaged Jesus," we endeavored to speak directly to our friends and neighbors from Hindu, Muslim and Buddhist backgrounds. We mailed 14,000 invitation cards to our community.⁶⁹ The goal was to "unpack" the Jesus of the Bible from its later wrappings. The themes were Jesus and Krishna, Jesus and Buddha, Jesus and

⁶⁸ Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). For a complete description of resources and uses, see: <http://www.justwalkacrosstheroom.com/>.

⁶⁹ See Appendix 2.

Muhammad, Jesus and the Da Vinci Code and, finally, Jesus and Me.⁷⁰ A Muslim guest prayed to receive Christ during the week on Krishna. Nevertheless, outside of that this was an evangelistic bust. Heavy snows and spring break possibly had some effect. It is important to address these with respect while engaging various audiences. We endeavored to build bridges while identifying critical distinctions.

Making Sense of the Bible: Life's Big Questions. Students from English class are invited to a semiannual five-week series, *Making Sense of the Bible*. This introduces the gospel in a teaching venue that sets it in the broad structure of the Christian worldview and framed so that it "life's big questions."

Creation: Who am I and why am I here?
Evil: What's wrong with me and my world?
God's Commands: What does God require of me?
Jesus: How can I know peace?
Afterlife: What happens to me after I die?⁷¹

The curriculum is taught in a Q & A format. While the same material is used for each course, teaching for each class is adapted for the religious backgrounds of each group. The first class compares the message of the Bible to a large metropolis with an explanation that goes something like this:

When we move to a big city, how do we find our way around? We usually buy a map. But we are faced with a problem, for there are just too many streets to memorize! So we find the major thoroughfares and neighborhoods.

That's what this class does with the Bible. You will learn its major themes that run through its pages. In fact, the Bible is more than a collection of random events, but is one big story that runs from beginning of history to the end.

It starts with God's creation of this spectacular world and the special place he gave to human beings, then tells us why the world is in a mess and what the

⁷⁰ Preaching to religiously diverse audiences has its own dynamic that calls for a focused goal. "Effective preaching refuses to settle for the lowest common denominator between religious traditions. To preach as if there were no genuine differences between Christianity and other faiths is seen as not only degrading and dishonest but also profoundly dull." James Nieman, "Preaching as Words of God in a Multifaith Society," *The Clergy Journal* 80, No. 2 (Nov/Dec 2003): 3-5.

⁷¹ See Appendix 5.

Creator has done to bring it back to its proper relationship to himself. Its main message is who God is, what he is like and how we can have a right relationship with him. Its last book foretells the end of history as we know it.

Firewall against Rival Theologies and Deities

Concerns over the potential infiltration of rival theological teachings and allegiances have not posed a problem. While GRIF involves a wide range of backgrounds for many services, only Christians teach. Scripture is a firewall that lets people into our corporate worship on Sundays without their deities. The same is true for small groups. Cross-religious interaction stimulates believers to know their Bible. Issues of rival allegiances are addressed when one comes to Christ. Pastors and mentors are responsible to mentor them with tools by which they can “renew their minds.” The first lesson in discipling a new believer from a religious past comes from Colossians 2:6-7. The Holy Spirit assists them in knowing what they can keep and what must go from their old beliefs.

Story of Faith

Rao and Laksmi (Lucky) are from southern India. She originally came to learn English. After attending GRIF for a few months, they visited our home with several other newer guests. Rao said, “Before GRIF, I was not assimilated into society. Just went to work and came home. I stayed to myself. Now I socialize, have friends. It’s good.” Lucky who came to the U.S. later as Rao’s new wife added, “Before GRIF, I was lonely, sad and very depressed. Through ESL, I met church people. Now I have friends and am no longer sad. I have my questions answered about God.” With tears she added, “Before I didn’t know who Jesus is. Now I know.” Both of them spoke with heartfelt gratitude for the ways GRIF has reached out to them in their isolation, far away from home, and breathed life into them through friendship and by pointing them toward Jesus. A few months later, this happened.

Lucky requested that my wife and me visit them at their apartment. Her voice was anxious. We learned that they had just closed on a new home and planned to move within the next two weeks. Her mother had called to remind her to take the family gods with her and put them in their proper places. Lucky told her "I'm a Christian now." Her mother was insistent for the protection of the home. She told her mother that she would invite their pastor to come and dedicate the house to God through prayer. That request occasioned this visit. On the following Saturday morning, my wife, Pam, and me, along with Larry and Marsha, strong believers, sat with Rao, Lucky and their new baby, Jay in a circle on the living room of their unfurnished new home. In preparation for this house dedication, this pastor felt a nudge to read from three passages in the following order: Psalm 127:1 (identity of the builder), Matthew 7:24-27 (necessity of a foundation) and the most delicate, Joshua 24:14-15 (spiritual allegiance of the parents). After reading these, saving the most delicate passage to last, both parents were addressed. They were commended for this request to have their home dedicated to God. The following statements were then addressed to Rao:

Dedicating this home demands a choice of allegiance between the previous gods and Yahweh God. You are asking me to dedicate this house to God. Now we come to a significant question: Which god? You know I am a Christian pastor and that means that I will dedicate it to Jesus Christ. What I hear you asking today, is that you want this house to be dedicated to the Jesus Christ. Is that what you want?

Immediately, Rao took the lead: "Yes, that is what we want." Lucky agreed. I would learn later that Rao had never been too impressed with "the gods from across the river." But for him, the God of the Bible whom he was beginning to understand fit into an entirely different category. After hearing their allegiance, all of us rose to our feet. We began to move from one room to the next starting with the nursery, then the master bedroom and to the kitchen, the front and back doors, anointing all with oil in name of Jesus. The Lord's presence was powerful.

Privately, partly out of curiosity, two questions were put to Lucky. First, "What will you do with your old gods?" She replied, "I will keep them; I will not throw them away. If my parents come, they will ask where is the *puja* room? They want to see *puja*. They may use them. I want to give my testimony at church when my parents come. They might believe in Jesus too."

She was then asked if she plans to "dedicate a *puja* room for Jesus alone." That she had already thought it through became obvious: "No. I have learned that *puja* room is silly. God doesn't fit in a room or a cupboard. I can talk to him in any room of my house! He is with me everywhere I go." To that gem she added another: "You don't have to read a Bible every day. Jesus says, 'Follow me.' If we do that, the Bible makes sense. If we do not follow Jesus, the Bible does not make sense." No one had to encourage this new believer to "find a church home and begin to grow." That was because she already belonged to it. She was securely connected through godly women who had surrounded her with intentional nurturing friendship. Her affiliation was clear, meaningful and unsolicited: "GRIF is the perfect place for me. It is home." Rao had earlier informed me that if it were not for GRIF they would have returned to India despite his good job. Her choice was less an alternative to other churches, but to a previous allegiance: "I'm still confused why people give names to God. I am afraid of the Hindu temple."

Rao's journey to Jesus came later. A man who respected authority, family and lived a life of hard work, he, nevertheless, privately deemed the deities of his past to be objects worthy of derision rather than worship. He brought Lucky to English class but, for a long time, kept his distance. After a year, Larry invited him in and he became a tutor. He would often join the group after class to Bolba Latte's, a Vietnamese coffee shop. Rao supervised the IT department of a large food chain. After a while, this writer asked him if he would run the Power Point presentations for his Sunday messages. Always

willing to serve, he agreed and continues it to this day. After coming to Christ, he read the following testimony at his baptism.⁷²

First of all I want give thanks to GOD for giving me strength to do this. This is not easy for me. I want to thank everyone in this congregation for supporting Lucky, me and Jay and treating us as one of your family members.

I used to come to this church every Wednesday to drop of my wife for English class. I never came in. Somehow I felt I was not invited or I didn't belong here. One day Marsha and Lyla invited me to come and help English Language Learners (ELL) folks with my broken English. It really changed my life. Then I attended one of the courses taught by Pastor Joe, I think it's called Introduction to bible or something like that [*Making Sense of the Bible*]. I am glad I took that course.

Unlike most of you, Christ wasn't introduced into my life naturally (by birth or through family). I was raised up in a society where we were told that man's salvation depends upon KARMA. Salvation is to be earned by doing good works. I knew that I am a sinner and my good works could not wash me clean enough. I was convinced that I myself could not pay the penalty of my sin through my good Karma. So I kind of resisted GOD all together in my life.

Pastor Joe mentioned that there is an alternative to this karma, called GRACE. Jesus paid the penalty for my sin through His atoning death on the cross. Jesus died on behalf of me once for all. Then myself, I came to realize that doing good works could not give me any certainty of salvation, but by believing and following Jesus will. Then Marsha and Larry invited us for Sunday service. The more we came, we realize that all the things we heard about churches while we were growing up are not true. We were told that churches were either all White or all Black. I thought, I am not White or Black so I won't fit. But from the first day I that I came here I always felt like I fit. We came to realize that we are with right group of people and above all with the right God, who is full of Love and amazing Grace. Thank you for introducing Him into our lives.

Since that time GOD did some amazing things in my life (too many to mention). Above all having Jay [Jay Krish born 3 months ago] changed everything in my life. I am not only praying for my salvation but I am praying for my family's salvation as well. Since his conception, I came to know that God is with us protecting us because of all your prayers. Marsha, Larry and Missy can attest to that fact since they were there at the time of his birth at the hospital. It was an eventful evening.

When I attended baptism class pastor Joe asked us to pick one Bible verse that I can mention it here. When I read Jeremiah 29:11 through 29:15 I really felt like GOD said that verse to me.

⁷² Rao publically read the following written testimony before his baptism on March 2, 2008. Used by permission.

For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call upon me and I will listen to you. I will gather you from all the nations and places where I have banished you declare the Lord and bring you back to the place from which I carried you into exile.

Like everyone, I have been through ups and downs and struggled with different aspects of my life and the changes that need to be made to live life as God wants me to. I felt deep down that full commitment to God and the life he wanted me to lead was too difficult and would require too much change; change that I was not sure that I was really capable of and to be honest was not sure that I really wanted to make. I struggled with relinquishing control of my life to God. But it isn't a case of changing my life so that God will save me; it's a case of changing my life because I have already been saved through Christ. So, I want to take this first step and get baptized today to acknowledge before everyone that Christ is Lord over all my life. I give praise to Him for His Amazing Grace and I commit my life to serve Him. May God bless you all.

On the day Rao was baptized GRIF had begun a 24/7 prayer effort in which people come for one-hour time slots around the clock for a week in a designated prayer room. They intercede on behalf of spiritual, physical and financial needs. The pastoral staff rotated the night shifts, unlocking the front doors to let people into the building. On the second night at the 11:00 PM hour slot Rao, Lucky and Jay arrived. It was Rao's birthday and he came toting a brand new NIV Study Bible given him by Larry. "I'm going to read it straight through," he said. They were full of joy in their new-found Savior as was this pastor.

Rao and Lucky's journey is not that of refugees faced with dire circumstances. They came from India to the U.S. to become good citizens and make a life for themselves. Even though he was advancing in his career, the loneliness they felt thousands of miles from home was severe. Like many others, they came to belong. If it were not for GRIF, they shared, they would have returned to India. But GRIF is their family. The multiethnic church offers a home away from home.

PHASE 5: The Church Being Community – From Coexistence to Inclusion

Welcome one another, therefore, just as
Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God.
– Romans 15:7

The presence of twelve to fifteen nationalities and ethnic minorities currently attending Sunday services puts GRIF into a new phase that constitutes our present joy and challenge: How does the coexistence of people from diverse cultures become a community of multiethnic people?

Pulpit Point: Include Them

GRIF must include the Other. Bringing them to Christ without enfolding them into the church is like birthing a baby without providing an environment of nurture. Including them takes many forms, the most basic as instruction in the Word, surrounding them with other believers, involving them in service projects or places to serve, mutual hospitality and sharing life together. Discipling all nations according to Christ's command (Matt 28:19) obligates us to reach out and include foreign-born and domestic minorities into our fold. Motivations arise at several levels. This we do, first, in grateful response for the costly love of God that embraced us in salvation (John 13:34; 1 Pet 2:2-10, 1 John 4:9-12, etc.) as well as the sacrifices made by members of his community that took us in and brought us up, without whom we would have remained left out. Theologically, we include others in God's stead, the Creator who sought Adam in his treason, the Father embracing the wayward son (Luke 15) and the welcoming God in his Son (Rom 15:7). Ecclesiologically, inclusion expresses the identity of the church, a community in which there is no East nor West, South nor North because Christ has made one "new humanity" (Eph 2:15; Col 3:10) out of a fragmented society. Foreigner, local, male, female, lettered, simple, affluent, destitute (1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:28; Col 3:11) gather as one body to celebrate the sacrifice of its Messiah (Eph 2:15-16) at one table. Morally, we

choose to include multiple cultures in wholehearted obedience to the command of our risen Savior as opposed to a begrudging obligation as though forced to do so through a government mandate. Missionally, the sheer peculiarity of this voluntary demographic assortment dumbfounds the world for which it exists with the hope of spawning inquiry into what might be the unifying attraction of its transcultural appeal. Cultural diversity that flourishes and coexisting peoples who love one another is made possible when Jesus is Lord and the mind of Christ prevails over that of ethnicity and culture (Col 3:2, 10-13). The ensuing medley of languages coupled with the seldom seen collage of hues and cuisines become a glory-emitting creation of inexplicable display (John 17:21). Explanation points to the Father from whom every family on earth is named (Eph 3:14-15) and to the Spirit who weaves scattered peoples into one fabric of fellowship with His Son (1 Cor 1:9; 1 Pet 1:1-2; 2:9-10) and with one another (1 John 1:3, 6-7). GRIF must include the Other!

Pitfalls of Exclusion

Once a multicultural group gathers, how does community occur?⁷³ Gathering under one roof is an important first step. But settling for multiple groups in public worship stops too soon in a kind of “cosmetic diversity”⁷⁴ that potentially lulls a congregation into resting on the laurels of its early gains in pressing forward toward a MEC. Logjams that block intimacy – whether social, lingual, religious, cultural or historical hostility –make community life a greater challenge.

⁷³ This question applies equally to a HUP church!

⁷⁴ An expression used by Wayne Schmidt, former pastor of Kentwood Community Church, in private conversation, 2009.

Embrace the Vision but not the Stranger

A few longtime core members enthusiastically supported the international focus but have yet to become meaningfully engaged with foreigners or indigenous minorities who attend GRIF. Even at all-church potlucks, some consistently gravitate to familiar friends. What is to be made of this? At first, this pastor was disappointed, casting the actions of the “sold but disengaged” as a pitfall impeding mission. Believing that Christians who are mature must model a standard for those younger in faith, he would mildly chide the Board after some of these events: “At all church picnics and potlucks, consider yourself on duty. We can get with our friends anytime. As leaders, you and I are there to serve others in our mission.” Was this judgment too hasty and harsh? Does not the NT itself erect ethnic spheres of missional vocation as in the case of Peter narrowly to Jews and Paul broadly to Gentiles (Gal 2:2, 7 etc.)? In addition, should we not consider cross-cultural ministry to be a gift that the Spirit distributes on some members rather than a divine command incumbent upon all? Absent from the NT lists of spiritual gifts is hospitality or “love of the stranger” (Rom 12:6-8; 1 Cor 12:4-11; 27-30; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Pet 4:10-11). The quality of being “hospitable,” however, is one of the essential qualifications for overseers (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8) and its cheerful practice is a mark of fervent love spread to the whole church (1 Pet 4:8-9; cf. Rom 12:13). In no instance does the NT excuse believers who might habitually ignore or overlook others by virtue of their difference in ethnicity or culture and seems to warrant prudent admonishment in such cases. On the other hand, people like Peter and Paul are unambiguously called to different people groups and Paul never castigates Peter for not ministering to Egyptians or Syrians.

Hasty judgments can alienate well-meaning people.⁷⁵ The reality is that the MEC must have the support of the disengaged core as long as they take active roles in support ministries that make mission possible. These long-standing members for the most part support the church through faithful attendance, highly ethical lives, serving when able and financial stewardship. Many agree in principle, expressing their willingness to extend friendship but wrestle with time demands. Others seem to remain locked in a paradigm that views the church as sender, supporter and provider of mission rather than church sent, a view that limits their current missional potential.

This tension will likely remain. While this pastor has come to accept that no one can be forced to put feet to the MEC vision, its church leaders must be held to higher levels of accountability. The GRIF Board was alerted at its first annual meeting to expect this question at the beginning of each monthly session: "Into whose life have you invested God's love as a reflection of our mission since the last time we met?"

When a homogenously populated congregation becomes an MEC like GRIF, a second "core" group will emerge that consists of "third culture" people who intentionally, habitually, and aggressively reach out to new people. This pastor is grateful that GRIF's new core contains many of the original First Church core members. Those exhibiting a heart for mission, he has observed, tend to gravitate that way despite shifting mission-field populations. In the meantime, it seems best to this writer not to alienate the original core, but instead pray that the Spirit leads them to surprising ventures outside their comfortable circles as we see in the life of Peter when pushed out beyond his ministry sphere to the Jews into the home of the Roman Cornelius (Acts 10). He was never the

⁷⁵ A more charitable response was expressed by a female Board member, the give-it-time approach, as one of her initial reservations about the MEC vision: "That we might forget those of our congregation that are still struggling and not part of the multicultural dynamic."

same again. The reality remains that the support of the first core should be fostered while recognizing that the new core will likely become the future of the church.

Reaching Out but not Including

This attitudinal pitfall tends to view immigrants or refugees as permanent recipients rather than those transitioning into mutual contributors. It confuses their temporary condition with a fixed status in a way that unwittingly defaults them into outsider status within the congregation. Old mindsets of haves and have-nots can block growth of refugees even after becoming established in their new land. This can occur on both sides. Existing indigenous members can easily notice them in our services on Sunday and think to ourselves, “O yes, those are the people we are helping. I’m glad our church is doing this.” On the other side, the attending refugee may view Western Christians as the resource upon whom they must continually depend. These perspectives over time can easily harden into a fixed interplay of pity and dependence rather than fostering greater empowerment and mutuality.

Romanticize Community – Expect Too Much

A pastor who looks over “a congregation of delightfully bewildering complexity”⁷⁶ must have realistic expectations of the MEC because:

... subgroup tensions exist. Romanticized and idealistic hopes for interethnic harmony are not only unhelpful but paternalistic. Needed instead is a basic realism about the tensions that exist, as well as the creative energy to use them instructively and fruitfully. Ethnic subgroups, taken seriously, can be a sign that enriches the church and honors the distinctive places where all of us, even preachers, must stand.⁷⁷

We have seen some of the old tensions occasionally surface within both the Burmese and Sudanese Christian communities respectfully in which tribal or clan loyalty can

⁷⁶ Phrase aptly captured by Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 33.

⁷⁷ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 33.

impose a measure of strife. These call for prayerful mediation when possible. Promising signs of both a desire and willingness to reconcile have been seen. For example, one of the Burmese fellowships replaced its state name with its more inclusive national name in an effort to convey a message of wider acceptance. Reconciliation, we are seeing, is a divine gift that empowers an ongoing process. The basis of worship among the various subgroups is the unity of God: "Even in light of the potential for human sin and division, these groups gather as people of faith who await from God a hope beyond the wounds and hatred they have already known. Perhaps most basic of all, this unity of God is the gift that preserves congregations amid their ethnic differences."⁷⁸

Careless Stereotype, Naïve Ethnocentricity, Sinful Prejudice

Like any other congregation, GRIF is composed of fallible people who sometimes fumble with cross-cultural communication. Occasionally, that expresses itself as comments made in ethnically insensitive ways that typically spring from ignorance ("where do your people come from?"). On extremely rare occasions, however, it has not been so innocent. A Sudanese father and GRIF member informed me of an incident at a Meijer's food store in which he saw one of our members near a check-out line. Excited, he walked over to him with a smile, greeted him by name with an extended handshake only to have the member become embarrassed, turn around and hurry off. While contrary to typical GRIF practice, this ungodly rebuff apparently did occur though our Sudanese brother refused to identify the offending member.

Deficient Spirituality

Louis J. Luzbetak writes with eloquent conviction,

We acknowledge the truth of the Lord's warning that "apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Without the Holy Spirit, the Church would be but a lifeless

⁷⁸ Nieman and Rogers, *Preaching*, 33.

body, a corpse, and at best a “noisy gong, a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor 13:1) and not the vibrant Church of the Acts of the Apostles... The most important and most desirable ingredient in a person engaged in mission is genuine and deep spirituality.⁷⁹

If the habit of walking in the Spirit rather than the flesh was automatic, admonitions such as we find in Galatians 5:16 would not be necessary. Believers in Christ who will crucify their self-centered core and yield themselves to the Spirit (Gal 5:24) will blossom with distinctive fruits of Christ himself (Gal 5:22-23). By doing so, they will promote love rather than provoke competition among the congregation’s individual personalities and various subgroups (Gal 5:26; cf. vv 13-15). This spiritual depth puts within reach levels of unity previously thought impossible as God’s “new creation” (Gal 6:15) begins to rise and is crowned by his “peace and mercy” (Gal 6:16). If, on the other hand, believers resist the Spirit, then what may be expected? Such individuals will find themselves at best disconnected, disengaged and distant, if not vulnerable to divisive propensity (Gal 5:15, 26). From a pastoral perspective, spirituality that is shallow or absent altogether represents the taproot of most other pitfalls, the latter symptomatic of this deeper one. Its antidote points to soul-searching renewal through passages as Psalm 51:11 and Ephesians 5:18.

Pathways to Inclusion

What stimulates a climate of belonging and authentic community among richly diverse subgroups existing within a congregation? How do meaningful cross-cultural engagement and friendship thrive among us? How are inter-cultural skills and communication developed? Pathways for us have been the following.

Aimed High: Become More than You Are

⁷⁹ Louis J. Luzbetak, S.V.D., *The Church and Cultures: new Perspectives in Missiological Anthropology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988), 1-2.

The Bible understands ethnicities as families. A Christian from the U.S.A. who suddenly was forced to live in a non-western country would likely search for a group of people who spoke English, eat hamburgers, celebrate American holidays and practice familiar customs. The MEC does not denigrate as “unspiritual” such grouping among peoples from outside the USA. We do, however, exhort all who profess Christ to “become more than you are.”⁸⁰ “You are Bosnian? Great! Now you are a Bosnian in Christ along with the Mexican who is in Christ. In Christ you are not less Bosnian but you are more than Bosnian. We are Christ’s community. Be more than you are.

Worship -- Equal but Not the Same

When Americans (who like to fix things) hear that GRIF is a multiethnic church, one of the first questions raised pertaining to worship style. Some assume that we must face inflammatory conflicts that must be solved. Peter Rowan of the Malaysia Bible Seminary addresses racial segregation in his society and asks what role churches should play in a divided society that looks for solutions in bringing integration. He asks a poignant question: “Is our approach to such an issue more a matter of strategy when it ought to be a matter of spirituality?”⁸¹ That view takes more of a biblical framework that extends the act of worship to more than Sunday morning. The most singular factor knitting together a wide range of people in the worshiping community at GRIF does not come through any magical style but, rather, through an awareness of the Inhabitant filling the temple (Eph 2:18, 21-2). The Holy Spirit that permanently lives in this body as its divine resident (Eph 3:17-18) is quite different than a divine visitor who drops in and

⁸⁰ I am grateful to Peter Tuit, formerly a missions professor at Calvin Theological Seminary, for sharing this with me in conversation, May 2000.

⁸¹ Peter Rowan, “The Malaysian Dilemma: Where is the Racially Reconciled Community?” Lecture, Malaysia Bible Seminary, Malaysia. Accessed on Jan 5, 2009 at http://www.redcliffe.org/uploads/documents/the_malaysian_dilemma_16-1.pdf

out on a weekly basis. In practical terms, what happens on Mondays through Saturdays in the interactions among the members of the body is as critical for worship as the particular protocol chosen or what selected elements are utilized for a particular service. Worship comes out of life. Through the Spirit it cannot be tacked on to community life. We might take cues from Colossians 3:7-17 about the order of life and worship. If cross-cultural fellowship occurs regularly in a healthy manner then expressing our love for God freely does not become a problem. On the other hand, if relationships are weak or non-existent, there likely will be less consideration of one another when formally assembled in the Lord's name. The more believers share in the lives of one another, putting the preferences of the other before our own, the more matters of worship style will recede in importance.

Having said that, what is the MEC worship style? Does it simply look for a special generic style that everyone can tolerate? It is quite the opposite.

Developing a multi-racial congregation is not about excluding diversity or uniqueness from the life of the church. The corporate worship of a racially, ethnically mixed congregation needs to include the cultural elements of more than one group. By using different styles of music, varying the language, liturgy and form of the service, and the degree of participation invited – such inclusiveness and creativity can be enriching and can lead the congregation to a broader understanding of God himself. So then, rather than a dull, lowest-common denominator type culture dominating the church, a unique hybrid culture can develop that utilizes the best of all the representative cultures in the congregation. This can bear fruit in the total life of the congregation, not just in its corporate worship. The aim is integration, not assimilation.⁸²

This is true, but it is more than integration. A new culture develops in which various cultures recede and, by the Holy Spirit, Christ our great Savior takes center place. That is the beauty. The focus is not integrated culture but a Christ-culture. At GRIF, no two weeks are the same, but the MEC has impacted public worship in three ways. First, ethnic inclusion can be seen on the platform. Participating on the Praise Team not only

⁸² Rowan, "Malaysian Dilemma."

do we find Anglos but a Filipino, Vietnamese, Cuban and African Americans. Skits and monologues draw from different groups. A recent drama on the Tower of Babel utilized participants from the Bhutanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, African American, Cuban and Mexican communities. Chaos broke loose when each one began speaking in his native tongue in a way that poignantly and humorously conveyed what might have happened in the Plains of Shinar. Frequently, the same Scriptural text will be read in four or five languages. Some elements are less frequent such as some African worship dances, Sudanese choir, Phuong's Christmas song in Vietnamese, Ngein Ngein's (Burmese) spontaneous praise song in English, and others.

Second, Pastor Sharon Norman has introduced diverse styles of music. That diversity may not be as prominent in those who were raised in countries such as the Philippines or Vietnam come met Christ through western missionaries who introduced western forms of worship. As a multigenerational and multiethnic congregation, GRIF intentionally mixes styles and tempos. Normal tensions existing between expressions of worship that are deemed suitable for individual and public worship are heightened in a MEC. Some sounds are an acquired taste when exported from their own cultural group and call for tolerant ears. But it is their church also, and the merits of experiencing the kingdom of God in its vast sights and sounds outweigh individual preference. Christmas Eve services draw widely from ethnic subgroups. Scriptures describing the incarnation are read in Spanish, Filipino, Nigerian and Vietnamese. Music sung in Vietnamese and Arabic (Juba) turns the prophecy made by the Simeon after Jesus' birth (Luke 2:32) into a visual and audio reality. Wonder is enhanced by the sheer breadth of humanity in which the eternal Son of God identified himself through his humble embodiment.

Third, due to the language challenges of first-generation immigrants, an Arabic Language Service is offered on the first week of each month that is attended by Sudanese families. A Burmese congregation meets weekly. We cannot merely say "be

involved” because many minorities do not feel equal footing. So a personal invitation can empower through both social inclusion and simply making the “ask.” GRIF has received four waves of immigrants: Vietnamese, Sudanese, Burmese and, most recently, Bhutanese with each introducing a unique voice and contributing a perspective that builds up the whole church.

Conversion turns what is already there and thus brings a unique quality to each convert. While the kerygma of the gospel remains the same universally, the new life it produces varies from one culture to another because of the rich variety of culture. Gospel fullness of the gospel is precisely here. The church needs to bear the full witness, not just the white witness or black witness or Korean witness. People from other lands and cultures will bring a fresh perspective to the universal gospel and have much to contribute to the community of Jesus Christ!⁸³ What does this have to do with ministries in a church composed of a wide range of ethnicities and pre-Christian pasts?

Seeing Christ through Many Cultures. “God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose” (1 Cor 12:18). A congregation of multiple ethnicities is endowed with fullness of gifts and graces. All groups belong partly because they need each another. For none stands alone, adequately possessing all the traits of the body of Christ. When combined by the Spirit, however, the strengths that one ethnic group brings is able to compensate for the weaknesses of another. By standing back far enough one can see a whole body! Reconciliation to God through Christ becomes the doorway into the mixed fellowship into a temple of worship composed of stones of every hue and background. All bring something that is need to offer, not only the majority culture. All have something needed to offer. For example, Paul Tokunaga, a Japanese

⁸³ Lon M., longtime GRIF member, when asked how his life has been impacted by the MEC vision, wrote: “We gained new friends, new opportunities and excitement in worship. Experiencing changed lives through salvation and baptism.” First Church Member Response, Winter 2010.

American, describes five unique gifts Asian Americans bring to the kingdom of God⁸⁴ and challenges each to ask him/herself, "God, how have you gifted me? What passions do I have? What people in my world need what I have to offer?" As an MEC pastor, this type of study provides invaluable insights into a particular people group. He does for Asian Americans what Barna does for African Americans. He also cites areas of discipleship that are more challenging for Asians than other ethnicities due to temperaments and perspectives.

Those emerging from the crucible of suffering for Christ in a country bring rare and rich treasures to the church. In the NT era, persecution was considered the norm rather than the exception (Mark 10:30; Luke 21:12; John 15:20; 2 Tim 3:2), yet American Christians more typically have experienced and come to expect freedom of religious expression, comfort and convenience with challenges to faith expressed at a more subtle level. Christians from other parts of the world have much to teach us. They more than most understand ethnic identity and the power of propaganda. Trinh became a political prisoner in North Vietnam for eight years, Marco and Esther from Albania experienced the lethal mix of atheist ideology with State power, Ngein Ngein from Myanmar still haunted by police savagery as well as Khatim, Kuli and Madison and their families who carry memories of oppression and persecution from Sudan to the U.S. Their enduring pain, however, is not wasted. One white American-born First Church member, Karen T., related their impact upon her:

I have met people I would never have had the privilege to know any other way. I've gotten to put a face to some of the problems facing our world. I've heard stories from people who have endured things that I couldn't even imagine

⁸⁴ Peter Cha, Greg Jao, Paul Tokunaga, Susan cho Van Riesen and Jeanette Yep, *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 159-75. These five are: 1. Depth of friendship as good listeners, reliable and the ability to "feel deeply what others feel." 2. Evangelism through extraordinary hospitality that is warm and generous; 3. Able to bridge the gap for healing in the face of racial strife; 4. Stewardship of wealth and education; 5. The "gift of pain" as bicultural people who live with constant tension. That pain, he says, becomes a "redemptive gift" to be shared with others.

enduring, and their strength, courage and fortitude has inspired me to be a better person. I've had the opportunity to minister in areas that I would have thought I couldn't do, and have found joy and fulfillment. I have seen God do a mighty work, in a small and ordinary people.⁸⁵

As the heat of Christian persecution rises in this country, who is better equipped to assist indigenous white members of GRIF than those who have already been prepared by it?

Listen, Empathize, Open Up – From Pity to Love

A community requires communication like a human body requires oxygen. People remain strangers to us until we open up and talk to each other. A stranger from a distant land “comes alive” to local residents through hearing his/her story. Sitting in the living room of Kuli, for example, listening to him recount his journey to America from Sudan, his feelings for his wife and children, his love for Jesus and Scripture creates a new bond between us that was missing despite having “known” him in the halls of church for the previous two years. Skin color, food preference and fashion all recede into matters of minimal importance when we cross a threshold from one-dimensional labels to full-fledged human beings in which people simultaneously become simply people and unique individuals. That level of friendship is possible without subtracting anything away from unique identity.

Recognize Belonging on a Graduated Scale

The need to belong is universal and powerful. The GRIF demographic mix⁸⁶ consists of American born Anglos, foreign born non-Christians, American born ethnic minorities and foreign born Christians. In this context, some attendees from non-Christian religious backgrounds view GRIF to be their church family. Ashmita, a little Hindu girl, invites her friends to “my church.” This can happen because at GRIF people

⁸⁵ Karen T., First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

⁸⁶ Since refocusing we have not calculated percentages.

belong at a profound level before they believe. GRIF's theology is not universalist so how can that be? Of late, we are coming to understand belonging to be parceled out on a graduated scale that may be summarized as follows.

- Level 1 belonging: House of Humanity united to one race
- Level 2 belonging: House of Family (ethnicity) united by common ancestry
- Level 3 belonging: House of Faith, united to the body of Christ
- Level 4 belonging: Discipled, united by common truth
- Level 5 belonging: Disciple-maker, united by common mission

Why is graduated belonging important for the MEC? We have found four reasons. (1) With few exceptions, those who find Christ at GRIF from a different religious background considered GRIF to be their home prior to coming to Christ. If we excluded them from our lives until they became believers, all things being equal, we would still be waiting. Since illustrating the life of God (incarnation) preceded communicating the truth of God (evangelism), our strategy of reaching out begins with inclusion. (2) Some aspects of discipleship actually precede conversion as friendships form so that much is learned by watching and interacting even before a formal mentoring relationship begins. They learn about Christ relationally when receiving compassionate assistance, hospitable friendship and then biblically through gospel witness somewhere along the way. (3) The third reason to include them before is what occurs after they come to Christ. The possibility of someone making a decision for Christ and then opting out or disengaging from the church is diminished by prior relationships. Since they already consider the church as their family, belonging to the community is natural and not an imposition. (4) The fourth reason to include is that before this began, some feared that congregational conflict would increase by the addition of cultures. We find it ironic to have experienced more conflict about worship style prior to their arrival than after. What has increased with the arrival of international and multicultural guests is variety of worship expression. Even before crossing the line of saving faith, expressions of their gratitude for what they have received from Christ through the church take the form of greeting people in the foyer on

Sunday mornings, participating in some skits, and other expressions of thanksgiving. Of course, they do not partake in the Lord's Supper and other practices for believers only. There is more gratitude for the privilege of a place to serve. Challenges associated with gaining a congregational voice, agreeing on worship style, pastoral expectations and other parts of community life are precluded by the fact that, for most, GRIF is the only church to which they have belonged so that whatever we do is viewed as the norm.

Strategically, these graduated levels of belonging can provide a general path so that we can begin to engage in relationships wherever we find people and, with God's help, take them to the next level.⁸⁷ With each stage of this continuum is a tighter connection to both the church body and to the Lord's purpose.

Level 1 Belonging: Humanity – United to the Human Race. Everyone shares in the *imago Dei* and thus is responsible to live in society with mutual respect, value and civility ("from one man God made all...", Acts 17:26-28; cf. Gen 9). This takes the simple form of attentive friendship. On the basis of sharing the same humanity, we have plenty to respect in our fellow human beings from both multicultural and religious Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist backgrounds. Because of sin, however, the human family is not a happy family. Universal sin has not only robbed them of their political freedoms back home but spiritual issues that alienate them from God. There is a Christ-difference in how human beings are seen. Christ changed Paul's perspective in 2 Corinthians 5 by two fundamental unchanging realities: Christ will judge all (2 Cor 5:10) and Christ gave his life for all (v 14-15). In light of these two realities, "from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view... (v 16). So now he sees what Christ has made available to all: "a new creation" (v 17). Paul looked at people through his Christ-lens that revolutionized how he saw them. Like bifocals through which he saw both human

⁸⁷ See Appendix 9 for further elaboration.

depravity and divine possibility, this Christ-lens viewed all such people against the coming judgment and gospel provision. GRIF must ask ourselves if this is our view of humanity and, if not, to pause, repent and adopt this perspective and get engaged. If so, we will be passionate about reaching them, accepting them as human beings, listening to their stories, getting to know them and serving their needs. People belong at a profound level before they believe.

The path leading to them begins at Level 1. We go and enfold them as our own. Why else would God put them on our doorstep? We took this to be a divine act of prevenient grace on their behalf. The shift to embrace the outsider has carried unquestionable impact, not only upon the stranger, but the members of the congregation.⁸⁸ For Eva, GRIF's Administrator, the biggest surprise of this transition was "the joy of relationship... The opportunity, the gift, of being present at the birth of four Burmese babies, being called 'Mom' and 'Grandma' from Burmese refugees."⁸⁹ For GRIF that path to them takes the form of English class by which students acquire a basic fluency as well as develop friendship with a few GRIF members. Over time, a desire develops for something more than English, or learning how to adjust to the American way of life or even material goods. It is simply a soul-hunger, a yearning for something to believe in, a meaningful connection with God. It is then that a new class offered such as *Making Sense of the Bible*, ESL using the Bible or the *Jesus Film* as curriculum suddenly becomes of great interest. By the time a step of faith in Christ that leads to baptism occurs, they are already connected socially to some in the community of faith.

⁸⁸ When asked what one thing we got right in the transition, Andrew R., answered: "A mindset of openness towards strangers, not only in sharing our church space physically, but also allowing the sharing of their cultural experiences with us." In answer to the same question, Travis M., an African American, wrote: "...by making people feel welcome was the #1 thing the church did right." First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

⁸⁹ Eva S., First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

English class provides the foreigner with an on-ramp into the community of Jesus Christ that, hopefully, will lead to personal faith.

Level 2 Belonging: Ethnic Family – United by common ancestry (incl. legal adoption) and represents a subgroup of Level 1. Yet strategically we are learning to regard it with great respect due to its durable distinction as part of the Creator's plan as seen in chapter 2, expressing the Creator's distributive providence (Gen 10) and obligating families for the primary care for one another (1 Tim 5:8). Its durability arises from the fact of its origins, determined more by common ancestry rather than the place one lives. Sudanese families who move to the U.S. are no less Sudanese in Michigan than in Juba or Khartoum. Intimate connections among them survive national displacement much like the unbroken relation to the Jewish people that Mordecai and Esther experience in Babylonia and Persia. While mixed marriages between ethnic groups add complexity, ethnic identity is not nor should be erased. Many white Americans miss this strong ethnic connection by the fact that the U.S. stresses individuals more than groups.

Corporate ethnic identity at GRIF often surfaces through the seating in the sanctuary, a habit that initially bewildered this pastor. As an Anglo pastor of a MEC, I had imagined people would take a seat in a kind of "every continent in every pew" arrangement. As it turns out, however, those from outside the U.S.A. often choose to cluster together in proximity to others of the same ethnic heritage. From the platform, the Vietnamese sit to its far left front, the Albanians just behind the Vietnamese, the Bhutanese to the left back, the Burmese in front of the Bhutanese, the Filipinos in front of the Burmese, the Mexicans have moved from the right front to the back left, the Sudanese at the back right, the African Americans sprinkled on both sides toward the back, the Bosnians to the right front, the Brazilian with her Anglo husband at the right middle, the couple from India at the left front, the mixed Thai and Guatemalan couple

behind them, the Chinese college students at the right front, the Cuban with his Anglo wife and family just behind the Chinese, the sole Jew along with his new Anglo wife at the middle left along with those in their small group and, finally, the Anglos, typically the most disinterested in matters of ethnic heritage, sit predictably dispersed alongside of all of these subgroups. Initially, this pastor viewed such an arrangement as a problem to be solved and sure indicator that GRIF remains a work in progress (of course it is!). Further reflection on four aspects of this dynamic has led to a reevaluation of that appraisal.

First, most of these are aware that an ethnic congregation from their country exists in Grand Rapids and yet have made GRIF as their church home because of its inclusive vision. Second, family attachment expressed by sitting together does not threaten to divide catholicity any more than husbands and wives who sit together. Third, the probability of genuine cross-cultural friendships that have been formed would have had been minimized to near zero had it not been for a church that became intentionally inclusive. Fourth, the rare sight of transcontinental assembly worshiping one Savior and Lord is itself an unspoken witness to a gospel with universal relevance. Upon dismissal, the seating demarcation of ethnic “neighborhoods” dissolves in the foyer as a celebrative mass of intermingling. The point is that the MEC does not and is not meant to dissolve family groupings. These are natural connections and not partisan cliques or university sororities. The MEC excels in the way it insists that the sum is greater than the parts and our single spiritual and corporate identity as the body of Christ is greater than our many national identities and allegiances. It explodes the myth that the Christian God belongs to any one cultural piece as each part becomes more than it is. That something more is a fallible, yet concrete, community formed by the Spirit as a sign of peace in society.

While denying any semblance of perfection, GRIF, sitting in a city renown for provincial

thinking and ethnic segregation, distinguishes itself as proof-positive of the power of Jesus' blood to restore broken creation, a signpost of greater things yet to come.⁹⁰

Reconciliation between ethnic groups does not disrupt familial closeness nor the MEC diminish fundamental family structures of support, closeness and care.

Level 3 Belonging: Spiritual – United to the Body of Christ. At this level we belong by common spiritual adoption into the family of God and serving the same Lord. This begins when one experiences spiritual rebirth and is adopted into the family of the Father, reconciled by the blood of Christ, and knitted together into a communion of saints by the Spirit into the body of Christ, the church, an inclusive community for mutual edification ("the unity of the Spirit," Eph 4:4; Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15; John 3:5-6). As a human response to divine grace (1 Thess 1:5-6; 2:13),⁹¹ in addition to a personal relationship with God, we have a new belonging in the family of God. David Anderson expressed it well: "If you praise the same God I praise, we may have different mothers, but we have the same Father."⁹²

How does theological reality of belonging become an experiential reality? This has to do with how inclusion is affirmed in the family of God. How are those who spiritually belong to the family of God made to feel included and affirmed by the church? This question was raised at a meeting of GRIF's Strategic Planning Committee, a task

⁹⁰ "I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could count, from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...and they cry out with a loud voice, saying, 'Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb...' Revelation 7:9-10 (NASB)

⁹¹ Even within the church there is belonging to subgroups of judiciaries and denominations. Denominations are to the one church of Jesus Christ what ethnicities are to the one human family. They are units of proximity and responsibility to carry out the ordained function given to the whole church. Neither ethnicity nor denomination is an evil entity. Denomination is not the same as denominationalism any more than ethnicity is ethnocentrism. Ascribing equality to these is not only naïve but wasted energy and offers solutions of ecumenicity that are superficial, time consuming and distract from more promising solutions. It is not strategy but spirituality; not organization but humility.

⁹² David Anderson, "Race to Unity" message at Kentwood Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 5, 2009.

force that that evaluates our progress in reaching our mission and identifies three critical areas on which to focus our energies (critical success factors or CSF) for the following three years. Distilled to its purest form, the most recent committee concluded that GRIF must be a place to belong, to grow and to serve. The simplicity of those terms mask the complexity they represent given the factors of our demographics as an MEC. It was a point to include on this committee a broad range of participants. It was inclusive both ethnically (Anglos, an African American, Sudanese, one from India and Nigerian) age and vocationally (retired engineer, government employee, Christian university staff member, health care worker and three pastoral staff members). Two questions were asked by the facilitator, Eva Schoon. First, each one was asked to describe a person's characteristics and attitudes if they feel like they belong at GRIF. Responses included safe, not afraid to speak up or of being rejected, having friends, relaxed, and feels needed and important to others. The second question was directed to the non-Anglos present: "We want to hear from those of you sitting here who are here from non-Anglo cultures. What makes you feel that you belong at GRIF or, if you don't feel that you belong, what would it take for you to feel that you belong?" Joseph from Nigeria answered "acceptance for who we are." Chance from Sudan said, "showing the love of Jesus Christ. Other churches we visited at the coffee bar, people would stay with their own groups. We were ignored. At GRIF, people approached us." For Rao from India it was "when pastor speaks and shows how the Bible applies to our lives. At the end of each message, he tells a story that applies. Then I get it." He also added "remembering our names." Important to him, as well, was being asked to serve which "made me feel like I belong. It's good to have more avenues of service." Brent, an African American raised on Michigan's east side, admitted that at first "the biggest thing for me to get over was culture shock. I thought 'What am I doing here?' It goes beyond worship style to denominational and the Black and White thing. But I felt like people took a genuine

interest in who I was.” And finally, Rao who had been befriended long before attending GRIF’s worship services said, “being involved with others; sharing their joys and pains.”

Level 4 belonging: Discipled—United by an informed commitment to Christian truth. Members of the body of Christ grow in even tighter cohesion by a growing knowledge of Scripture (“until you reach the unity of the faith,” Eph 4:16). Is the “unity of the Spirit” (Eph 4:3) and the “unity of the faith” simply two ways of describing the same reality? These, to the present writer, point to two very different matters. The former addresses Level 3 belonging that happens the moment one is born of the Spirit and is made part of the body of Christ. Is belonging by an informed commitment to common truth a new attachment or simply a deeper attachment to an existing point of cohesion? At first blush it seemed obvious this is not a new belonging but a deeper one. The word picture is “rooted” (Col 2:6-8):

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving. See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deceit, according to human tradition, according to the elemental spirits of the universe, and not according to Christ.

Terms or phrases pointing to a tighter fit to the same connection are “continue,” “rooted,” “built up in him [Christ].” All of these are organic connections but there seems to be added to this a cerebral connection as well. To the organic connection of being “built up in him” is added “established in the faith” and “just as you were taught.” This is the buffer against captivity to “philosophy and empty deceit” that arise from “human tradition.” What is this buffer? It is not mystical experience but a certain level of mastery of the body of Christian truth. “The” faith is more than the act of believing in Christ to salvation, but the whole body of Christian teaching.⁹³ So this is a separate point of cohesion which

⁹³ Leon Morris writes, “Mostly Paul speaks of faith in terms of trust in Christ or in God. It is the basic attitude that brings people out of their sinfulness into a right relationship with the Deity. So fundamental is faith that the term may be used to categorize the whole Christian way, and the expression “the faith” comes into being, not simply as a way of referring to the trust in Christ that is so basic, but as a means of drawing

protects “belonging” from sentimental attachment that can easily dissolve. This level of belonging tightens the coherence between the believer and the church. It is especially vital to the MEC in the way that it guards against idealistic brands of multiculturalism that lack sustainability. This deposit of truth provides uniformity without which there would be chaos. As we “stand fast in the faith” (1 Cor 16:13) and leaders must be “sound in the faith” (Titus 1:13; 2:2) and “be nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound teaching” (1 Tim 4:6) as well as “contend for the faith of the gospel,” (Phil 1:27) because in the last days “some will renounce the faith” (1 Tim 4:4). At the end of his life Paul testified, “I have kept the faith” (2 Tim 4:7). The definite article gives this away as a mastery of content as one part of the process of discipleship. Having recently passed its ten year marker, GRIF is acutely aware that so many efforts went into reaching out that discipling efforts did not keep pace in the process. This particular CSF, to grow, currently attempts to rectify this area through a discipling strategy that will aid growth in “the faith” in addition to our current efforts. One of those happens on a series of Thursday mornings from 6:30 to 8:00 in which three men sit around a table and learning “the faith” and becomes one of the highlights of this pastor’s week. Having experienced this with several men in at GRIF, it never grows stale. The latest group was composed of two dear brothers, Rao from India and Chandra from Bhutan, both baptized within the previous year. They are exceptional learners with huge appetites for more. One of the chief ways in which these men display their love for God is their appetite to learn “the faith” about him. These men will not easily fall for substitute philosophies.

attention to the whole body of teaching and practice that characterizes the Christian group. It all springs from faith and is an expression of faith, yet it articulates and expresses what Christians believe, their doctrine or “deposit”... it is not the simple exercise of trust in Christ that is meant, but the Christian way of belief that results from that trust.” Leon Morris in Hawthorne, Gerald F., Martin, Ralph P., Reid, Daniel G., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, electronic ed., 1993), 290.

Level 5 belonging: Disciple-Maker – United by a Common Mission. This level of belonging are those who are actively involved in advancing the Great Commission by making disciples across ethnic borders. This is serving for the common good. Active contributing member of the local body of Christ in its discipling, serving, and reaching ministries according to the varied distribution of Christ's gifts and calling ("as each part does its work," (Eph 4:17; cf. Matt 28:19; Rom 12:4-7; 1 Cor 12; 1 Pet 4:10f). This represents inclusion at its deepest level because it fulfills a goal that is of utmost importance to God: "faith working itself through love" (Gal 5:5). It brings optimum , helps to close the back door and opens new ones.⁹⁴

GRIF's goal here is involving refugees and forming reciprocal relationships with them. This is where we learn to love one another and work together in obedience to the great commission of Christ. Those accustomed to giving must humbly receive while others in the habit of receiving must venture contributions. An ordained inequality in the body of Christ is intended to help us cohere by interdependence in loving relationships of mutual give and take.

Clarification of "Belonging before Believing"

The expression "belonging before believing" in a religiously pluralist context might suggest a softening of theology for the sake of inclusion and sound an alarm of creating a slippery slope towards doctrinal liberalism. Definition is of utmost importance. At GRIF we distinguish social belonging enacted through a wide net of compassionate care and friendship (Levels 1 and 2) from spiritual belonging that confines itself to the

⁹⁴ David Anderson captures this with the 3-R's: "reading opens our minds, relationships open our hearts and listening opens our ears to their stories."

church body through divine adoption (Level 3).⁹⁵ Our strategy to help people move from Level 2 to Level 3 is through the class described above, *Making Sense of the Bible*, that works something like this. During the final session to the most recent group from Bhutan, all Hindu people with whom we have fostered compassionate friendships for many months, we stated the following.

You and your families have become such good friends to us. We care about you, have enjoyed being with you and greatly appreciate what you mean to us. We also value many things about your culture. You have come to this class to hear what the Bible says about these important questions. While its claims sometimes contradict some of what your religious books have taught such as how to be saved and what happens to us in the afterlife, we believe it is God's Word and you have the right to hear it. It is good news not only for Americans but for all people everywhere. God has no pets.

After the gospel message is shared, God's call to repent and believe is extended. It is hoped that through the Holy Spirit some or all will be brought to Level 3 belonging.

How does the church respond to people who are affiliated with a religion? It is our understanding that if left to ourselves, we would have options, but since we are servants under the Lordship of Christ, we have orders (Matt 28:29-20). That means to us that the initiative for extending loving friendship belongs with us. That is, "going" by definition requires relocation so that we need not delay action until the Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim comes to us. We fail at this more than we succeed, but try to avoid four mistakes that can carry long-term repercussions: (1) out of fear to befriend them without ever explaining the basics of the gospel; (2) in the name of tolerance to gloss over differences in a way that betrays Christ and the suffering church by minimizing the cross; (3) out of dislike of a people group to withhold love; or (4) out of fleshly fear to

⁹⁵ Level 1 belongs by virtue of the *imago Dei* and says, "I'm no better than you." Our solidarity rests securely in Adam, that there is only one race, the human race. It allows for mutual respect and recognition of value. Level 2 recognizes their ethnicity and respects it as part of the Creator's richness and providential care. It is about family. It is permanent, it is providential. The apostle Paul recognized both of these in his message on Mars Hill. That we all come from a single race, are given a providential place and these are gifts from God for the purpose of human seeking God.

adopt the weapons of the gospel's enemies by answering evil with evil (Rom 12:18-21). Since the day of God's favor has arrived, everyone deserves a faithful gospel witness. And if the practices of Jesus and Paul can help us define "faithful" witness, then we conclude that in many if not most cases that social belonging will precede spiritual believing. Understood missiologically, for Jesus and Paul there was a kind of two-tiered inclusion. The incarnate Son and the apostle to the nations met people where they were and demonstrated the gospel in deed and Word. Jesus instructs us as well to "let them see your good works." To bridge the religious and culture gap, we relocate into their lives for the purpose of making the character of the invisible God conspicuous. After driving Tika, a Bhutanese Hindu man, to the hospital, said to me, "You are the face of God." Actually what he saw was the face of Joe being led by the Spirit of God in an incarnational act relocating me in a place to make the invisible God conspicuous. Perhaps it was God he saw! This began Level 1 inclusion with Tika that has led to Level 2 friendship in his home and a lively gospel witness in a question and answer format. We are simply defending that the love of God unleashed in the body of Christ through the Spirit leads to social belonging which opens the spirit to hearing the gospel message. We need not read syncretistic assumptions into these premises. We simply endeavor to honor a sequence of grace-filled social interaction prior to faithful proclamation. Preaching, it is hoped, will move social belonging to saving believing that, in turn, engenders spiritual inclusion. Confusing methodology with theology is simply not necessary and embracing Paul's theology while employing his methodology becomes a potent combination.

Congregational Model

What congregational model best expresses the nature of the church while facilitating Christ's mission in the world? After developing our ideological core, we began

formulating ideas of what a high functioning structure would look like. One model that GRIF avoided was the multi-congregational or the rental model in which different ethnic groups conduct services in the same facility at various times. Reasons for this arose largely out of earlier experience as well as philosophical objections. A group of wonderful Haitians had become part of First Church through a former pastor who had served as missionary to Haiti. Their joyous spirit brought warmth and vitality to the services. Yet because of language and cultural differences, minimal integration into the larger life of the church became a major challenge. For all practical purposes, they became a church within a church and after the planting of two churches, they also expressed a desire to start their own. Despite my pleadings with their leaders to find ways to integrate into GRIF, they believed God wanted them to go. They did so and in a short time became self-supporting and their relationship with GRIF continues to be mutually positive. Our philosophical objection to this model was the belief that successive worship services in which various nationality groups simply shared the same building fails to provide a level of meaningful integration that demonstrates the range of Christ's reconciling power.⁹⁶

Peter by the Spirit seems to argue that, the church as God's "chosen race [*ethne*]" (1 Pet 2:9) which includes the nations, Christians are capable of far more than greetings in the hallways between services. Given the fiercely loyal attachments of ethnicity, how can interethnic cohesion have a prayer? He writes, "Now that you have purified your souls by our obedience to the truth so that you have genuine mutual love, love one another deeply from the heart" (1 Pet 1:22). The issue, that is, is not preference but "obedience to the truth." The capacity for "genuine mutual love" to plunge to even greater depths ("love one another deeply from the heart") resides in the MEC. But is this sustainable over time? Again, Peter affirms so. Sustainable fellowship rests upon the sustainable

⁹⁶ The exception would be a transitional provision for first-generation immigrants due to language comprehension.

Word creating it, “the imperishable seed of the word of God” (1:23) as the source for continual growth (2:2-3). Concerns over abbreviated longevity are warranted, however, if the MEC coheres by any other epoxy. Church leaders oriented to biblical revelation need not live in defeatist fear but thriving faith.

Over this decade, two models have emerged and now a third hybrid is being developed. The first we called “Community of communities.” The thought here was to embody both the ethnic diversity of our neighborhood and the unity of our faith in Jesus Christ. The capital “C” community represented the whole congregation. Contained in this “one church” were small “c” communities of ethnic subgroups. We envisioned the church to gather as one body, but in each subgroup a leader would come to faith, be discipled and, soon following, a disciple-maker within his/her community. This person would need to speak English, serving as a liaison between GRIF leaders and his/her group. That then is what we first conceived to be the “Community of communities” model. On Sundays language designated services would provide first generation immigrants with the ability to worship God with comprehension. Their second-generation children, teens and young adults could integrate with others in the larger English service in the sanctuary. Theoretically, this model holds appeal. What is wrong with it? It never came to fruition at GRIF, perhaps for a simple reason. It presupposes ethnic subgroups of significant size to already coexist in a congregation. That does not describe GRIF. Many of our “groups” are only two people. Should we appoint one member to rule the other? This may indeed be a valid model at a future stage, but not now. We needed to keep looking. We found what we were looking for in what authors of *United by Faith* called the “Integrative Model” (IM).⁹⁷ It is best defined against two other “old school” MEC

⁹⁷ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 165.

models, the “assimilated” and “pluralist.” The following table makes its comparisons clear.

Table 1. Characteristics of Multiracial Congregation Models

	ASSIMILATED Multicultural Congregation	PLURALIST Multicultural Congregation	INTEGRATED Multicultural Congregation
ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE	Reflects one dominant racial culture	Contains separate and distinct elements of all racial cultures represented in the congregation	Maintains aspects of separate cultures and also creates a new culture from the cultures in the congregation
RACE OF LEADERSHIP (LAY OR CLERGY)	Dominant race	Representative of the different races in the congregation	Representative of the different races in the congregation
SOCIAL INTERACTION ACROSS RACES	Can be high or low	Low	High

Source: DeYoung, Paul Curtiss, Michael O. Emerson, Karen Chai Kim, and George Yancey, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (NY, NY: Oxford University Press, 2003), 165.

The “assimilated” model achieves ethnic coexistence by blending multiple people of different ethnicities but not of their cultures. It may be commended as superior to a monoethnic congregation and intent on achieving coexistence among diverse groups. It must be rejected, nevertheless, for the way in which it seems to promote unity at the expense of diversity. The “pluralist” model, like the assimilated type is to be commended

in its attempt at inclusion, but does so by taking an “affirmative action” kind of approach to achieve it. Quotas and percentages of ethnic representation are established. We reject it for the way in which it overemphasizes the distribution of power and under-emphasizes blended social interaction. It resembles an ecclesiological equivalent to a government program.⁹⁸ GRIF places a greater emphasis on service than power. Given GRIF’s dual goal of outreach and inclusion, our church Board formally adopted the IM option in 2007.

One racial group may be a majority, but its culture is not dominant. Rather, members develop a new way of doing things that is particular to their own church. A new culture is created...This congregation has developed a hybrid of the distinct cultures that have joined together in one church. Elements of different racial cultures are not incorporated to “appease” diverse constituencies. Rather, the new hybrid culture is an expression of the congregation’s unified collective identity.⁹⁹

We believe this best promotes the reconciling power of the gospel and most closely reflects the NT descriptions of the church. We are one congregation, not many. Theologically, this construct aims high, seeking to express a third culture, a “Christ culture,” by the Spirit. The authors point out that this model is:

... the biblical ideal, but also the rarest of the three. There is no sense of “us” and “them” according to race, but more “us” as a congregation and “them” outside our congregation. In human terms, this goal is difficult, but the supernatural power of God can enable congregations to overcome racial barriers.¹⁰⁰

For all of its advantages to commend it, it does have one limitation. Functionally, it fails to adequately appreciate the power of language in matters of worship and praise. People pray in their mother tongue. Kwame Bediako of Ghana writes, “In matters of religion, no

⁹⁸ GRIF does not disparage, in fact, encourages the idea of appointing people of a large ethnicity to the elected church Board for the sake of representative voice. This tenth year at GRIF is the first that people of color were elected by ballot to the Board. We rejoice.

⁹⁹ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 68-9.

¹⁰⁰ DeYoung, et al., *United by Faith*, 68-9.

language speaks to the heart, mind and inner feelings as does our mother tongue... Each of us with the Bible in our mother-tongue can truly claim to hear God speaking to us in our own language.”¹⁰¹ Bediako’s treatment of “Divine Speech as Vernacular” underscores our dilemma at GRIF. If it is true that “God speaks to men and women – always in the vernacular,” then the IM as a model cannot stand alone in an internationally composed MEC. Bediako’s assertions ring true. Esther and Marko, an Albanian couple in our small group follow the discussion around biblical texts fairly well, but with minimal input. It is difficult for them to convey their thoughts. However, once group prayer commences, something dramatically changes. They begin praying in English, yet before long they burst with sacred fluency in their native Albanian tongue. There is something sacred about the mother tongue that forms an intimate bond with God.

This puts two kingdom values in constant tension at GRIF. On the one hand, the IM extols the premium of unity that we guard with great care and, on the other, the provision for an authentic encounter with almighty God in the directness of one’s native language and not hearing that message filtered through an intermediary vocabulary. The challenge of GRIF, then is how to retain the integrated congregational model in a way that facilitates multiple languages? So far, those who worship and praise the Lord in our gatherings have been magnanimous in spirit. What do we do?

Our “solution” has been to augment the IM with partial elements of the “Community of communities” model. This allows ethnic communities to gather for worship in their own language and style. Yet we diligently protect the “one church” model to avoid merely sharing the same facility without relational integration. How does it work? There is ambivalence. Many still prefer to remain in the main English service because of

¹⁰¹ Kwame Bediako, *Jesus and the Gospel in Africa: History and Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 32.

the energizing mixture of many peoples worshiping the same Lord. Another option is translation equipment that we have not seriously pursued.

Results 10 Years Later

This chapter began with the phase “The Church Believing – Congregational Buy-in.” Perhaps of greater importance than its acceptance during the initial period is its level of “buy-in” as it reaches its ten-year mark. Members of First Church who have remained through the ups and downs of this dream were given opportunity to reflect on this journey to transition and submit their thoughts. On a survey, the question, “How has your life changed or been impacted?” was answered in the following ways:

My faith has been strengthened anew and that God truly does the impossible and nothing is too big for Him. Praise God! (Lucy C, senior adult)

I have been able to get close to two families in particular, since I began tutoring, which makes my life busier; also in a smaller sense, I have become acquainted with numerous other individuals. (anon., senior adult)

I have become involved in various activities of some of the people. (anon., senior adult)

[I am] Probably more comfortable with people from different cultures. (Jeff H)

I will never be the same. I have grown personally and spiritually from this journey and our church and my life is so much richer because of our multi-cultural peoples and the opportunity to connect with them and learn from them. (Sheila H)

I am still there because of the changing the church made. I thank God for pastor Joe because he reminds me of Moses. I know the changing of the church was not easy for Pastor Joe, just like it wasn't easy for Moses to lead the people out of Israel. (Travis M, African American)

I have gained new friends, new opportunities, and excitement in worship. Experiencing changed lives through salvation and baptism. (Lon M)

I have enjoyed their fellowship. I'm glad they're learning about Jesus. Some are changing their cultures. It must be a big thing for them. (Elaine N, senior adult)

I feel blessed having the ability to worship together spiritually and socially with people of different cultures. (Andrew R)

I feel blessed knowing that I am part of a bigger picture for the future of God's kingdom, and that our church is resembling what I picture heaven to look like. (Sherry R)

I have a greater heart for matters of justice. Life is not about me. Too many ways to mention..... (Eva S)

I've found that there is value and blessings in things that were unexpected. (Larry T)

Before the ELL classes I was asking God to show me how I could truly honor Him with service. I was doing jobs in the church that had satisfied, but not it wasn't filling the deep need to serve Him deeper. Sermon after sermon called us to find the place to serve where God was leading us. Saying yes to ELL led me down a path that has drawn me much closer to God. To serve in ELL, I had to trust Him completely because I knew I didn't have the love or the knowledge to serve internationals. I think He called Larry and I to a deeper commitment. I know God is teaching me to love and to be a more generous person. God is slowly changing me into the person He wanted me to be. I have made so many friends, and have found true family with some of our international students. What a great God we have. (Marsha T)

I have met people I would never have had the privilege to know any other way. I've gotten to put a face to some of the problems that our facing our world. I've heard stories from people who have endured things that I couldn't even imagine enduring, and their strength, courage and fortitude have inspired me to be a better person. I've had the opportunity to minister in areas that I would have thought I couldn't do, and have found joy and fulfillment. I have seen God do a mighty work, in a small and ordinary people. (Karen T)

Conclusion

Reflections on the past decade have reminded this pastor that refocusing a congregation is not giving it a new identity but attempting to recapture its deeply rooted essence and mission in light of its present realities. Newly arriving at a historic congregation to assume the mantle of leadership, pastors may have a tendency to view that church through their narrow window of time. Like others perhaps, this pastor has discovered a legacy of compassion in a congregation that had long been part of First Church. It has been a privilege to be part of this, not departure from the past, but its continuation. At the same time, there are, to use a cliché, new mountains to climb with

every generation. Many of us had simply not taken the NT gospel, the way of the cross, the risk of reconciliation in a corporate way. Salvation was in a deep or thoughtful way. Friendliness can mask an absence of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus in its Sooner or later we discover that we do not change the church but, with the help of God, simply bring out what God had already entrusted to it.

Seeing the gracious actions of a missional God propel both congregation and pastor beyond familiar paths to find treasures in the form of spiritual dependence rather than dreadful complacency, exposure to the suffering of others that creates humility in the face of the courage of others, reappraisal of values, authentic friendships, an enlarged world of learning, new partnerships and sometimes new conversions to Jesus Christ.

GRIF has not aimed at forming a bi- or tri-cultural congregation of African and Hispanic Americans and Anglos. To do so in a global community, in the view of this pastor, would be an excellent means but not a goal. If a church has only one ethnicity, it should prayerfully add a second. Then, a third. Why stop? In places of interethnic conflict and hatred, believers from all sides must build bridges. Yet it can too easily makes multicultural blending an end in itself. GRIF's calling from the outset to its multicultural community has been to connect people in our multicultural community to Jesus Christ and, together, grow in full devotion to him. Religions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam are not ethnicities. This thesis will have value for any church that desires to reach out and include its immigrant community. The definitive dividing line for GRIF has not been color but faith. Addressing the eternal welfare of lost people takes precedent over blending cultures. One of the realities faced at GRIF, a painful one for this pastor, is the time demands in assisting certain groups that take away from indigenous African and Hispanic Americans. Even beyond those demands, there is an evangelistic priority to

see our friends who have not been exposed to the gospel to see it, to know it, to consider it and, by faith, to take it and be forever changed by it.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The central issue of this thesis has grappled with a complex dilemma containing two separate challenges in which the answer to one requires a resolution of the other. How do congregations effectively reach out to Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists who have immigrated into their community? Stated most succinctly, we have argued that the best solution is the multiethnic church. But how do we get a church that is homogenously populated to genuinely get engaged in this endeavor? Given the natural human tendency to segregate with others who share our own culture, customs, even color, why and by what means does a monocultural congregation close the gap between itself and its diverse community? Either prong – evangelism in a religiously pluralist milieu or refocusing a traditional homogenous church multiculturally – represents a worthy yet formidable goal. Combined, they have brought our congregation to an acute recognition that it stands in need of divine aid that, in turn, inspires a correlating doxology for achievements befitting a Creator.

“With God, all things are possible,” declared Jesus. We stand at the foreboding juncture of divine possibility and unexceptional performance. The realm of possibility burst gloriously in first-century inclusive Christian congregations of reconciliation throughout an Empire with cities like Antioch, Syria that were riddled with ethnic strife. Far more commonplace is their twenty-first century counterparts, congregations resembling an archipelago of ethnic islands in a sea of diversity. How can today’s congregations recapture that primitive spirit that exploded historic borders with grace-filled reconciling *dunamis*?

Conclusions

In light of this study, what conclusions can be drawn about the multiethnic congregation? And to what end can those assertions serve? This final chapter takes the findings from scriptural and theological foundations of the multiethnic congregation (Chapter 2), the relationship of the gospel to religion (Chapter 3), consideration of the missiological advantages of the MEC (Chapter 4), the insights of selected published works by MEC proponents especially in assessing the homogenous unit principle (Chapter 5) and lessons learned in the story narrated of one church's journey from a monocultural to a multiethnic congregation (Chapter 6) to offer a reproducible template for church leaders of congregations who sense a divine call to connect people in their multicultural and religiously pluralistic communities to Jesus Christ and enfold them into their fellowships. What follows are what the author deems to be its most salient conclusions and pertinent applications for other congregations. The latter are framed in a suggestive format sufficiently broad allowing space and freedom for local expression. From the preceding chapters we make the following assertions.

The MEC is the New Testament Norm for the Church

The MEC is the NT ecclesiological norm rather than a cutting-edge model of the church. Chapter 2 demonstrated how the ethnically inclusive church need not build its support by contriving unrelated biblical texts nor by dipping narrowly into Scripture. Instead, it factors in the grand sweep of revelation as it unfolds through a succession of pivotal events noted as "landmarks" on a symbolic superhighway of special revelation.

That first landmark laid the anthropological basis for the MEC by sanctioning ethnic diversity within equality. The *imago Dei* confers on all humanity transcendence, intrinsic worth and equality. The chronological sequence placing the Table of Nations prior to the Tower of Babel, an order that depicts spreading humanity resulting from

obedience to the creation mandate (Gen 1:28; 8:17; 9:7), strongly suggests flourishing ethnic variety to be a phenomenon of divine delight rather than disapproval. In addition to the divine intention of ethnic diversity, we noted the absence of ethnic superiority. That is, within this ethnic constellation, there is no master race possessing exceptional endowments that catapult it to the rank of global leadership. On top of divine intention and equality, we showed how each subgroup reflects the distributive providence of a benevolent Creator who delegates caring oversight for human beings. Each of these represents a manageable unit of responsible care through a network of families and clans to ensure provisions, protect life and ward off the blight of aloneness. Beyond these, Genesis portrays humanity as a whole to be greater than the subgroups comprising it. Each bore a distinctive stamp of its unique ancestry yet was subsumed in the human ecumene bearing the higher mark of the *imago Dei*, suggested by 70 nations as a symbol of numerical fullness. Both aspects, ethnicity in its particularity and humanity in its commonality, will vividly reemerge in eschatological salvation. Where that Table enumerated sanctioned diversity resulting from human compliance, a Tower would symbolize chaotic dispersion arising from arrogant defiance. The Tower of Babel, appearing immediately following the Table of Nations, becomes the colossal symbol of individual rebellion. What had begun as a single episode in the Garden of Eden now issued in a universal pathology of the race. Human solidarity post-Eden encompasses not only the *imago Dei* but the *imago Adam* in his dignity and disgrace. The family tree simultaneously flourishes and decays, sprouting in its earliest limb a saint and a murderer. As its separate offshoots grow over time into ethnic branches, innumerable bifurcations strip the globe of the original *shalom* through ethnocentricity, prejudice and interethnic conflict. As noted in Chapter 2, the covenant-hope of Genesis 12 follows the sorry examples in Genesis 1-11 culminating with a Tower. It suggests a perplexing set of questions that might have been raised in the first post-Babel generation. That is, will

humane interethnic community ever re-emerge in a new beginning or is society destined to segregate into a sprawling honeycomb of competing ethnicities? Is there a chance that a new people could somehow overcome hostile propensities that can reverse the tide of interethnic conflict? Or is the Table of civilization doomed forever to remain under the shadow of the Tower of Folly? In dramatic appearance, the next landmark introduces the divine solution to these questions.

The second landmark, the Abrahamic covenant, sets in motion a plan matching the range of human failure with the scope of divine salvation. In the words of Anna Marie Aagaard it launches mission as a “movement from God to the world” as opposed to a “church that has a mission.”¹ It is the Triune God, that is, who “includes the church” in his mission. The unfolding salvation of God with its globally encompassing reach from the start renders the charge of divine favoritism to be unwarranted. The church to come, like Israel, will be a “particular means for a universal goal.”²

The third landmark, the Mosaic covenant, defines the relationship that agents of divine blessing must establish with the recipients of that blessing, society at large. As antithetical allies to the world, the church’s effectiveness to exercise her priestly role to ultimately extend the nearness of divine favor to those in need of it (Exod 19:6; 1 Pet 2:9) actually turns on an identity of distance as a holy nation belonging to God. By its life and teaching, it stands diametrically opposed to profane systems of decadence and death. In this sense, the hope of the world lies in the sanctification of the church, a beneficial connection resting upon a spiritual condition duly noted later by Jesus in John 17:15-19. In the Literature Review of Chapter 3, it was noted that the HUP in the U.S.

¹ Anna Marie Aagaard, “Missio Dei in katholischer Sicht,” *Evangelische Theologie* 34 (1974): 420-433; quoted by David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 390.

² Christopher J. H. Wright, *Knowing Jesus Through the Old Testament*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 38.

had actually turned McGavran's evangelistic strategy into an ecclesial model. In doing so, it shaped the nature of the church to fit a social reality and, in doing so, muffled its prophetic voice and dramatically diminished its potential as a reconciling presence.

The fourth landmark, the Psalms in which we find more than 175 references to the nations, extols the God who makes the nations glad. It beckons them to know their bountiful Creator, find Israel's gracious Redeemer and celebrate earth's righteous Judge! The Mosaic Covenant had presented God without form and yet speaking directly in first-person speech to Israel (Exod 19:9, 17; 20:22-26; Deut 5:2-5, 22-27) in a way that both assured her of his covenant love and solemnly warned her, in light of that direct address of audible revelation, against inexcusable idolatry practiced by her surrounding nations. In Psalms, by contrast, God repeatedly addresses the idolatrous nations. His countenance breaks into compassion for the earth and all of its inhabitants who belong to him by virtue of creation (Ps 24:1). The One desiring that no one perishes but for all to find life uses every raw material of his Creation so they may leave their makeshift idols to gladly know the living Lord. Such is made possible through the stereophonic revelations of Creation and the special word of grace through God's redeemed family. Drawing from the Psalms, the MEC exists to be part of gladdened doxological chorus among the peoples of the world in its own back yard. Nations must hear the suffering servant in Psalm 22:27, for he calls them to himself: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations." Without fanfare, the Lord will be praised: "Be still and know that I am God. I am exalted among the nations, I am exalted in the earth" (Ps 46:10) or with vociferous reverb: "Clap your hands, all you peoples. shout to God with loud songs of joy. For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome, a great King over all the earth" (Ps 47:1).

The fifth landmark is heard through selected voices from among Israel's prophets to whom were shown an unprecedented international gathering of worship. This is all the more remarkable given their uniform disdain for religious pluralism, especially when Israel, the recipient of special revelation, was ensnared by them. Within messages of judgment upon wicked nations comes hope. These bring salvation history closer to the MEC by predicting an unprecedented day when God will not only reach the nations through Israel but will incorporate them into his covenant people. To the divine blessing ultimately spreading out centrifugally from one seed to the many anticipated by God's covenant with Abraham, some prophets saw ahead to a centripetal gathering of global worship from the many to the one. They forecasted the involvement of an astonishing mixture of peoples coming together as one, uniting in common worship of the Davidic King, Redeemer and Lord. Micah saw the nations flocking to God's temple to worship him along with the covenant community (Mic 4:2) despite nothing on his horizons to foster such a sunny outlook. Isaiah, his contemporary, was shown an inclusive vision of sweeping proportions. Archenemies of Israel will become their brothers: "Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my heritage" (Isa 19:26). Privileged titles of intimate endearment – "my people, the work of my hands, my heritage" – previously reserved exclusively for the sons of Jacob, will now be whispered into the ears of Egyptians and the likes of Sennacherib. In Isaiah 19:18 profane tongues will "speak the same language of Canaan" all because a major change in the structure of revelation, divine disclosure on a grand scale would provide Israel's enemies access to the saving knowledge of her God. For "the Lord will make himself known to the Egyptians" (Isa 19:21), so that those who once knew the Lord in judgment at the Exodus can know him in grace. Two aspects of Isaiah's vision anticipate the character of the multiethnic church in the NT: its demographic composition and exclusive worship. The new community produced by such revelation will be global in span, encompassing

peoples beyond ethnic Israel. Eligibility in this revelation-formed family disregards hereditary factors altogether and will rest solely on whoever will “hold fast my covenant” (Isa 56:4, 6). That roster of peoples drawn in “to your light” (Isa 60:3) will include not only foreign enemies, but even Israel’s alienated half-brothers, the descendants of Ishmael who will come bearing gifts (Isa 60: 6-7; cf. Gen 25:12ff). Given their long-standing hostility, on what basis will these nations hope to worship together? A voluntary ingathering of this mix calls for a moral force able to dissolve centuries of interethnic and international turbulence. This leads to the second aspect of the MEC, the compelling object of their worship. This would be no celebration of multiculturalism to evolve in the latter days but of common praise to the same Lord. A transcendent allegiance will unite them so that “the foreigner [will be] joined to the LORD” (Isa 56:3). The same God who, by his own love and grace, initiated a covenant with Abraham, blessing him with a single “seed” of innumerable descendants, will somehow and in some way break open that “seed” so that its grateful recipients of grace may become its conduit to others. The prophet Zephaniah sees a preparatory spiritual purging that will take place in the nations that will precede their inclusion with Israel: “At that time I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord” (Zeph 3:9). Zechariah foresaw a universal hunger for God as nations that had been previously unresponsive to Israel’s God would come to experience spiritual hunger pangs for his presence. Souls desperately famished for an eternally satisfying fare will take the form of a mass migration in search of true Bread (Zech 8:20-23). This global ingathering will be followed by the arrival of a Messiah-King who will come “riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will proclaim peace to the nations” (Zech 9:9-10 TNIV). Significantly, in the common worship of this peace-King, Jews and Gentiles will find their unity: “The LORD will be king over the whole earth. On that day there will be one LORD, and His name the only name” (Zech 14:9

TNIV)! The nations will augment rather than replace Israel. The contribution made by these prophets, then, is that through Israel, God will not only reach the global community in individual salvation but will include them, forming one diverse faithful society.

Jesus Christ appears as the sixth landmark and the groundbreaking culmination leading to the MEC. In life he was the Includer, in death the Peacemaker and through his resurrection and ascension the universal Lord. The sweeping range of his inclusion in life anticipated the distant as well as more challenging close-up reaches of his reconciling power in death. Double alienation imposed, on the one hand, from God and, on the other, between human beings met its resolution in a dual reconciliation. That is, by Jesus' blood, prodigals in distant lands can return home to a gracious Father and, through Christ, find a whole new basis for fellowship in a reconciled community. This fellowship of the no-longer-estranged sits on a more promising foundation than the vaunted Tower of disappointment. Rather than erecting a monument of human achievement, divine grace opens the door into the household of salvation, a family of the forgiven and the forgiving, through which even former enemies find a welcome place. Reconciliation's dual motions coming down from above and going out toward others, creates and sustains the MEC by establishing a new relation of peace that did not exist before.

The seventh landmark, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost turned 120 individual disciples into the one church of the living God, ever enlarging her in kind as well as in size, forming a single expanding aggregate of nationalities, cultures, colors and languages. Remarkably, adding kinds of groups could occur without altering the kind of community it was (1 Cor 12:12-13). This descent at Pentecost contributed to the MEC in three crucial ways. First, the Spirit enabled a new level of performance by taking the unattainably high benchmarks of inclusion set by Jesus and engraved them into the corporate life of the church. Christ set the standard, Pentecost supplied the

power. Theologically, the Spirit fused Jewish and a wide mix of Gentile believers into a new ontological creation as the new Temple of God on earth. By taking up residency in individual believers, the Spirit gathers similarly-inhabited individuals into a divinely residing fellowship. In one sense, the MEC becomes in life what the Bible is in literature. Despite its multiplied fallibilities, the MEC becomes a fresh page on which the Spirit continues to descriptively fill, not with more words but with new creations through the ancient words. This living hagiography, however, is not written on passive pages but upon lives that are being transformed by an obedient focus of faith on the Son. This living epistle is being “read” by a stunned surrounding populace! Third, the Spirit became the Instructor-in-residence as the church crossed borders that raised puzzling questions of culture calling for new clarity. In this way, the Spirit was and is the agent of change who corrects deeply ingrained ethnocentric patterns by an ongoing renewal of the church’s mind. Acts 10 describes the dramatic reversal of historic prejudice in a “tale of two conversions,” one of a provincially-minded Jewish church leader and the other the first group of Gentiles at the home of Cornelius. From then on, old borderlands dividing fiercely provincial loyalties of one group from another would become porous frontiers of opportunity. The Spirit propels the church forward in the advancing mission of the Son. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 became a watershed event in the global church by protecting the gospel both in its universality and its cultural particularity. The God who “knows the hearts” and who “made no distinction between them and us” saves all by his grace alone and thus establishes the basis for one Church. Ecclesiology then is a derivative science in which the church becomes the mirror image of its soteriological origins. Multiplied distinctions of human cultures dissolve in the greater common grace through Christ as the prevailing badge of belonging.

The conversion of Saul and his commissioning by the risen Lord to be apostle to the nations advanced Christ’s Great Commission not only by his preaching but his

planting inclusive churches. Of incalculable value to the MEC is his ecclesiological teaching. The book of Romans, thankfully, marshaled poignant arguments for the MEC in strategic ways: the interethnic tensions in the city of Rome which were carried into the Roman Christian community could not overcome the high ecclesiological expectations demanded from its robust soteriology. The implications for congregations located in similarly populated settings are inescapable.

Others may contend that what is really important is individual salvation through Christ's blood while dodging its power to reconcile historic enemies. Better to have ethnic-specific congregations that praise the same Lord than to invite problems that come with a mixed church. Chapter 2 in the section on the Spirit noted the poignant arguments against such a structure found in the Book of Ephesians. Paul carefully proclaims how the "manifold wisdom of God" contains the secret of the ages. This mystery for centuries had been hidden from public view yet was parceled out to the community of faith through scriptural promises. That shrouded secret was lifted. The events of the gospel – Christ's life, death, resurrection and bestowal of the Spirit – broke the secret from its concealment. That is, through Christ's atoning sacrifice, two walls fell, the thick curtain into God's holy presence and the wall of enmity between the ethnic Jew and the nations. Now everyone, regardless of nationality, gender or life station may receive the gift of salvation by grace alone. How will the secret of the ages now become public property? What channel best conveys this hidden mystery? Paul leaves little room for rival hypotheses: "so the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church ..." (Eph 3:10). Plainly, the strategic medium through which to broadcast this divine secret is the Christian community.

Finally, the MEC is a community of hope that promises a future that will surpass its present attainment. Its current penultimate stage in the Spirit will blossom in superlative finality. Final peace will come at the expense of neither personal individuality

nor group ethnicity but by the most thorough banishment of sin in every personal and collective form. The multiethnic and international family will participate at this “eschatological family reunion.” Its range of demographic inclusion that was anticipated by the sprawling Table in Genesis 10 and its depth of merciful provision that was forecasted by another table around which undeserving outcasts dined in the company of the Righteous One will converge in that final unending Day around a table with even greater participation and exuberance. Setting this reunion apart from all preceding ones will not be in the extravagance of its accoutrements but the new apprehension of its Host (Rev 22:4). Through unprecedented nearness and unimpeded vision, the children present will finally have eyes to see the face of their Lord, a vision complemented with glorified faculties to fathom the glorious depths of him who sits on the throne and the Lamb who was slain. This table will require no chandelier because radiant glory will pass from Host to guests, from the heavenly Father to the heavenly family, simultaneously illuminating his light on all creation and burnishing his image onto the redeemed faces of all who have come from East and West, North and South (Matt 8:11). These will bend their hearts and blend their voices in a new song of salvation to God (Rev 5:9). This innumerable assembly “from every nation and all tribes and peoples and tongues” (Rev 7:9 NASB) all clad in white garments will split the skies in uninhibited worship with unfailing memory, saying, “Salvation to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb” (Rev 7:10). These will find their places with the innumerable collection of the saints of God at the marriage supper of the Lamb.

On the basis of this ancient highway of advancing revelation, this thesis takes the position that the MEC constitutes the NT ecclesiological norm. So then, where does that leave the HUP? It precludes it as a viable ecclesial option except in a necessary transitory stage while expectantly awaiting a wider inclusion. In Isaiah’s day it was “too small a thing” for the Servant of the Lord to reunite the exiled tribes of Israel (as great as

that was!), but was ordained and endowed for immensity, extending salvation to the ends of the earth (Isa 49:6). In the same way the HUP, indubitably enjoying the conveniences afforded by familiarity, settles for a niche when it could tap into the sum and dwarfs the range of available resources contained in the gospel message it proclaims.

One may yield to the concept but deny the practice. HUP proponents may persistently contend that the MEC may have theological clout but does not apply to the nitty-gritty realities of the local church in populations of interethnic strife. This pastor himself was formerly among that number. Congregations that are monoethnically composed cannot help but project an unspoken dissonance into their message. Ephesians further provides the church with the seven transcending commonalities that prevent a congregation from splitting at its interior seams.

The author emerges from this study with a firm conviction that the formation of community called the MEC is far more than a sidebar. It addresses the fundamental ache of the human condition. Man is lonely, alienated and cries out for belonging. Mercy has broken in to heal all ruptures, concentrating on restoring estranged individuals to their Creator before proliferating globally as a transformative healing movement through the formation of a community extending a wide embrace. A decade ago we countered some concerns that our new venture just might be an ecclesiological monument to a secular value. As we have just marked this first decade, we find it to be no such thing. We conclude that the MEC is no new trend or contrived concept imposed upon the NT. It is, rather, integral to the advancing reign of Jesus Christ. God is doing a new and creative work in the American church in aligning it with the primitive forces at work in the NT church rather than being conformed to its culture. As fallen society's antithetical allies, the church infuses kingdom hope into its broken community and world. Upon starting this venture in 2000 when we were a white congregation and a significant

number of people were leaving the church, in my notes were scribbled these words:

"What most people do not have is the biblical confidence that makes them ignore what some is saying [this transition is a bad idea]. We are doing this because this is the right thing to do!" This chapter has attempted to prove that statement.

Religion Stands in Need of the Gospel

The central issue of this thesis remains. How can congregations effectively reach out across cultural borders to ethnic minorities and to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who have immigrated into their communities? That strategic question required GRIF to formulate the theological connection of the gospel to the religions of those it is called to reach. Chapter 3 includes these assumptions. Viewed from the redemptive history perspective, we contended that religion arises from the interplay of four dynamic realities: the wide diffusion of general revelation, the endowments of human creation in the *imago Dei*, the idolatrous delusions of original sin and the pull of the Holy Spirit in prevenient grace. God made himself known externally through the cosmos as his "theatre" of glory and internally through the "seed of religion" through writing the moral law upon the human heart. His universal disclosure leaves no one destitute of transcendent truth (Rom 1:19) and everyone responsible for proper worship. Directionally, religion represents the upward movement of humanity in its search of transcendence or deity by many different names and conceptions. The salvific effect of this religious impulse, however universal its impressions may be, has been blunted by the distortive effects of sin combined with the delusions from the "god of this world" (2 Cor 4:4) upon the capacity to apprehend divine truth clearly. Religion represents temporally measured permission on the part of a forbearing God in the exercise of his restraining grace during this epoch that awaits its sequel of fuller revelation (Acts 14:16; 17:30; Rom 3:25). It falls then in the category of prevenient grace in preparation for the

“grace of God to appear in “bringing salvation to all men” (Titus 2:11 NASB). Seen in this light, the upward impulse of religion rises not as a tribute to so-called natural theology but solely to the overtures of divine love in an ardent pursuit of lost human beings. People everywhere stand in need of a fresh revelation and a new means of apprehension.

The gospel, in contrast to religion, is God’s descending movement in grace towards undeserving humanity. By the words and actions of Jesus, God could be apprehended at a radically new level of clarity. God made clear by coming near (John 1:18), through historical events culminating in the life, death and resurrection of his Son. By doing so, diffusive revelation became concentrated in crisp precision. As “deity in bodily form” (Col 2:9; cf. John 1:1, 14), Jesus mirrored his Father’s glory on earth, revealing God in his flesh fully and finally. What that incarnation provided for the mortal eye, his death accomplished for the sinfully darkened soul. Combined, blindness is resolved by vivid incarnation and distance eliminated by the public crucifixion in a spectacle of horror exposing sin’s heinous nature and sacrifice for human sin. What new assessment does this bring to religion?

The breakthrough revelation of the gospel into human history introduces a seismic shift in appraising religion’s ongoing usefulness in light of the full expression of grace in Christ. In terms of the relationship of the gospel to religion, this thesis argues that the gospel does not fulfill this or that religion but human beings. The church is not called to replace other religious systems with the superior system of Christianity but to offer the Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim the living Christ. Christ fulfills the deepest human yearnings expressed so vividly by the hagiography of these religions and shared by every Christian as well. Missionally, the gospel relates to religions in four specific ways. First, it provides relief to the existential aches that religions cannot satisfy. Second, it draws upon the manifestations of God’s universal providential care that have been

experienced prior to the gospel (Acts 14:16-17). Third, through an antithetical relationship the witness to the unique features of Christ and his gospel message can be prudently contrasted with the tenets or practices of its religious counterpart (Acts 17:23). Fourth, the gospel brings a discontinuous relationship with religion through its call to repentance in light of God's coming judgment (Acts 17:30).

Since the gospel offers what no religion provides, what kind of church can most effectively communicate its message to people of other faiths?

The MEC is the Ecclesiology of Missional Advantage

The final assertion of this thesis argued in Chapter 4 that the MEC represents the optimal demographic composition for serving God's mission in environments that are racially and religiously mixed. It is better able than its monoethnic HUP counterpart to effectively reach out to Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who have immigrated into their communities. First, it brings advantageous credibility by validating the church's claim of catholicity with clenching illustrative demonstration. Second, it better portrays the congruity between its identity and mission by aligning the church's diverse multiethnic composition as the grace-formed people of God with its grace-giving mission to its international world. Third, it extends an advantage of access by placing the range of salvation gifts within reach for people living on the margins. Fourth, in society at large it carries within it a peacemaking advantage, positioned better to bridge the racial divide in a world of unceasing ethnic hostilities. Fifth and greatest, as an antithetical ally in society it presents an alternative community of the cross. Here former practices of ethnocentricity, tribalism, cronyism, class-hatred, ethnic supremacies, nationalism and traditionalism have been crucified with Christ and, by the Spirit of resurrection, a New Man has emerged with befitting adornment of splendor of divine glory.

Chapter 6 demonstrated through specific examples how one congregation has endeavored to take the cargo of the gospel to its Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim friends on the track of compassionate provision, hospitable friendship and faithful witness. We pray for the Spirit to soften their hearts as we prepare their ear by providing for their eye, letting them see the Good News with arresting clarity before hearing it in its unvarnished power.

Personal experience supplies what rational argument alone cannot. Ten years of MEC experience compared with its preceding 90 years as a congregation composed ethnically similarly, GRIF is prepared to testify that, despite the multiplied flaws inherent in those who gather coupled with the admission that it remains a work in progress, the MEC in a world of religious options is more than the NT norm. It is magnetic!

Applications

How does a church that is homogenously populated get engaged in this endeavor? Many pastors may say to themselves, “I know it’s right, but I don’t know how to get there.” After noting comparisons and contrasts with the stages in GRIF’s transition that are narrated in Chapter 6, several recommendations are offered. Without reducing the process to simple formulas, from the experience of this pastor, these are considered essential steps for any transitioning journey toward becoming a MEC.

Settle the Question of Divine Calling

Becoming a MEC must be a calling and without the clear leading of the Holy Spirit there will be minimal buy-in. Pray to seek and discern God’s vision. First Church sensed clear divine intervention to plant new churches and to reach our global and multicultural neighbors. Otherwise, expect little support on the part of the congregation

and diminishing resolve on the part of leaders. God can communicate his direction in many ways, but certain criteria should be met. Do the demographics support it? Look at the census data, consult government offices, ask about immigration projections or visit first grade classrooms in local elementary schools to observe their ethnic composition. Second, are you persuaded that Scripture supports it? Have either particular texts or the general sweep of Scripture seized your attention? Do certain biblical themes resonate with you and engender new possibilities for your congregation? Third, do your convictions in prayer support it? Is God making it clear to you? Ask God for fresh insight (Jas 1:5). Fourth, do mature leaders in your church, including your spouse, support it? Fifth, does your passion support it? That is, do you have a strong desire for your neighbors from other religious backgrounds or other ethnicities come to know Christ? If not, take heart, but honestly confide in a mature Christian friend, seeking their prayers and believing that God will, in due time, give you a heart for reaching them.

Promote, Sustain and Realize the Vision

You will need to provide a strong rationale for the congregation to own this vision of becoming a MEC. Promoting the vision should not be understood as launching a slick marketing campaign. Rather than casting it in the image of a new program, the MEC must be a spiritual movement that first shapes the convictions of a few and radiates outward. It should be consistent with Scripture and principle. Avoid the impulse to advertise a desired image of your church to outsiders without having first accrued some observable measure of corresponding substance in theory, philosophy and practice.

Light the Way with the Torch of Scripture

Let the Word build belief in this vision first in the heart of pastors and leaders and then in the congregation. The pulpit plays a major role in which biblical truth takes a congregation from point A to point B. Harbingers leading up to the MEC in the Book of

Acts that were presented in Chapter 2 as “landmarks” are the same antecedent forces that can shape an inclusive congregation out of a twenty-first century HUP. Lasting behavioral changes can come only when preceded by a prior change of belief structures and internal mental renewal. “Thinking reconciliation precedes doing reconciliation.”³ Once people come to a belief that this is indeed not only the “will of God” but also is “good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12:2 NASB), they will be ready to take steps to see it actually come about. Let the Word build belief.

Develop a preaching series on the Church that Christ builds. The horizons of expectation of what a congregation can be and do will begin to rise. Be patient, knowing that God does more beneath the surface as the Word stimulates faith and propels change (Isa 55:11). It can correct ecclesial mediocrity and lethargy on the part of some and deepen rootless enthusiasm on the part of others. Listen to conversations for signs of awakened faith in those whom God is changing and make judicious use of these through public testimony. New voices will reinforce the vision, create momentum and, importantly, reduce the charge that this is the “pastor’s vision” by expanding congregational buy-in.

You will also need to protect the MEC from unrealistic expectations and romanticized notions with biblical descriptions of authentic Christian community during this process. Advocating the MEC does not require one to deny the challenges of coexisting cultures but to apply biblical interpersonal principles. For example, when faced with conflict, Romans 12:17-18 prescribes the following: avoid revenge (vv 17, 19), play by the rules (“respect what is right in the sight of all men”), do your part and give God time to work on both sides (“if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all men”) and conquer the ugly face of evil with acts of kindness (v 21).

³ Stephen A. Rhodes, *Where the Nations Meet: The Church in a Multicultural World* (IVP: 1998), 49.

A person's culture, it must be admitted, is very strong. Grace and truth, however, prevail. David Anderson in a public message declared, "If you have to choose between your culture or Christ, choose you this day who you will serve."⁴

Apply Biblical Correction to Flawed Views of Race

Offer your church a biblical perspective on the subject of race. Many pastors shy away from the subject, but cross-cultural relationships call for a biblical view of human beings. Colossians 3:10-11 exhorts believers to discard their former prejudices and put on the "new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew..." That is, "in that renewal [in knowledge]" we learn that there is "no Greek and Jew." Chapter 2 offers biblical anthropology that can turn a touchy subject that alienates into a touchable one that endears. The following emphases are pivotal to building the necessary view of race: (1) There is only one race, the human race (see Gen 10; Acts 17:25-6). Take note of the studies of Eugene Nida, Charles Kraft and Stephen Pinker supporting human commonalities that form a basis for interethnic comprehension. (2) Ethnicity is no mistake to be repaired nor a curse to be reversed but an original design with an enduring legacy to be gratefully received from the hand of the Creator. No ethnic group is the ideal for the others to emulate. Each is equally precious in the sight of God (Gen 10; Acts 10:34). (3) Ethnicity is not about color but about country or ancestry. Counter the prevailing attitude of looking at race in terms of black and white with a biblical understanding of natural kinship expressing divine care for all. Be aware of the protective survival instinct felt by minority groups. (4) Through sin ethnicity becomes a source of conflict, but through the Cross and the Spirit a source of fullness. (5) Spiritual

⁴ David Anderson in a message at Kentwood Community Church, Grand Rapids, Michigan, November 5, 2009.

identity in Christ, both personal and corporate, is greater than ethnic identity. Acquaint yourself with the testimonies of those who have found wholeness in this new identity. Sundee Tucker Frazier, daughter to an interracial black and white couple that is also devoutly Christian, is one such example.⁵ (6) The MEC does not worship cultures but the Triune God alone. Cultural lenses add richness to our praises.

Search Your Heart for Sinful Prejudice

It is essential that pastors and people invite the Spirit to search their hearts and minds for traces of prejudice and, if found, to weed them out. Recalling the experience of Peter in Acts 10 (see Ch 2) shows how it is possible for a strong Spirit-filled believer to unconsciously harbor thoughts of contempt towards others until exposed by the Spirit. It points as well to hope for mental renewal. This may be an ongoing exercise as God exposes false ideas that we have acquired about ethnic groups. Rather than excusing such attitudes by focusing on heritage—"that's just the way I was raised"—freedom will come through humble confession, relinquished old habits, mental renewal and wider social engagement. This exercise will enlarge the ethnic range of our ministry, a territory which is determined less by the number of subgroups residing around us as the kind of attitudinal occupants inhabiting us. Because of Peter's repentance, Cornelius the Gentile -- hardly a distant resident in Caesarea -- was able to hear the salvation message. A pastor might capture this event in a two-part preaching series from Acts 10, "A Tale of Two Conversions," that is discussed in Chapter 2.

⁵ She writes, "God's reality has been freeing for me—someone who has more often obsessed about my racial identity than ignored it. I am first and foremost Sundee, the beloved daughter of God who is daily being made to reflect the image of my Creator. I have clothed myself with Christ, and it is most important that people see him when they look at me—not that they see a black woman or a white woman. Christ lives in me. God, in taking on human flesh, dignified all human flesh, regardless of its color." Sundee Tucker Frazier, *Check All that Apply: Finding Wholeness as a Multiracial Person* (Downers Grove, ILL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 73.

Merge Visionary Reading with Anticipatory Prayer

Let Scriptures become your intercessory template for this vision. As you read, ask how, who, where and when these things will come about in your congregation. Your levels of anticipation will increase as the Spirit directs you. Personally invite others to begin to pray with and for you as you begin. Provide them with an intercessor's guide.⁶ Ask for open doors into new populations, eyes to see them and courage to enter them. Resolve to not allow fear to inhibit obedience.

In settings riddled by interethnic conflict, pray that your congregation becomes a contagion of hope that emits the glory of the reconciling God. Make time for your own faith to feed on relevant passages (e.g., 2 Chr 20:29; 32:7; 25:28).⁷ Further, ask him to raise up people in your congregation, including yourself, as pined pipers of hope who will lead an increasing number of families out of their chronic despair. Pray that your church will become a refreshing oasis of cross-cultural peace amid its surrounding racist jungle. Ask that it will offer respite, safety, border-crossing pathways on which the Prince of Peace will tread. Plead that your congregation and others in your city will become go-to places for the fearful and the marginalized. Pray big and expect much!

Build Leader Support by Preparing them for the Journey

When painting the vision for the MEC be sure to prepare the leaders for what is ahead. Honestly explain to them that you need their support on the basis of principle. Their loyalty will be especially crucial during the early stages or in the face of setback. Prepare them ahead of time for the costs of following Jesus. Both Jesus and Paul pre-warned their followers of the rigors of obedience so that they would not be in

⁶ See Appendix 6.

⁷ The recognition that the Bible does not promise to eradicate racism and interethnic conflict society in this life need not diminish your belief that God will bless your obedient efforts in the ministry of reconciliation (cf. 2 Chr 30:1-10).

disarray when difficulty comes (John 16:13; 1 Thess 3:3). Show them the difference between hard times and closed doors. The former is an opportunity to display the resilient nature of the gospel (1 Thess 2:2) whereas the latter refers to an obstacle to mission that cannot be moved at that time (Acts 16:6-8) .

Share Your Pulpit with Preachers of a Different Ethnicity

Open your pulpit to articulate and respected Christian leaders who share the MEC vision from ethnicities or cultures residing in your neighborhood but that are underrepresented in your congregation. Instruct them beforehand that the goal is to encourage the congregation, build a can-do spirit and touch on some the challenges. It is not a platform to upbraid any group for racist behaviors. Do ask them to share what they have found personally helpful in their interactions with the dominant ethnic group.

Capture the Mission in a Memorable One-Minute Vision Talk

Compose and commit to memory a verbal snapshot of what this new vision might look like. Pastors will be asked in informal conversations what this refocusing effort is really about. Rather than fumbling for words or meandering through confusing details, it helps to capture its essence in a few brief compelling sentences. For the present author it was,

You know, our city is full of white churches, black churches, Asian churches and Hispanic churches. We don't know each other. Remember the children's song, 'Red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in his sight?' What would it be like to belong to a church that looked like heaven, a kind of United Nations of praise? Think of all the good that could bring. That is what we are becoming!

This simple mini-talk was met with responses from non-believers and church dropouts such as "It's about time!" to "Wow, that's awesome."

Promote Harmony During the Transition

Provide people with information and enough time to process it. You are asking many of them to reverse their perspectives. Allow for buy-in to come at different times for

different people. Some will immediately embrace the new vision with enthusiasm once they see its biblical support and missional advantage. Others who reject it and find a new church home in your area, handle with principled response rather than personal attack.⁸ Showing class and integrity will send positive waves of change as well as contain the storms. Some will indeed leave, but more will remain loyal to the church but with personal reservations, semidetached with a wait-and-see attitude toward the new vision. Pastors can help these by carefully listening to concerns and expressing their own personal difficulty with the vision. Casting an overly cheery demeanor is neither necessary nor helpful. Showing authenticity through a willingness to express some of the misgivings you grappled with in your own journey will build credibility and trust.

Align the Practice of Public Worship with Biblical Principles

The church will be served by having a few well thought-out biblical principles to guide public worship and shape the various local traditions. They will enlighten discussion and minimize argument or rancor (Phil 2:14). What is written in prior chapters needs not to be repeated but reviewed. Consider also the following: First, corporate worship is part of the beauty of the MEC in expressing God's nature with attributes and personality that cannot be confined to any single culture. The MEC expresses that fullness as people from a spectrum of cultures and backgrounds freely express their praise to God. Thus, tap into that rich reservoir of cultural expression through wide cross-cultural involvement.⁹ Second, the Spirit enables worship by freeing the worshiper (2 Cor 3:17-18; Gal 5:12) to draw attention to God (John 4:23-24; 16:14). Third, worship

⁸ It helps to remind ourselves that the "good fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12) is won with strategies worth emulating (1 Tim 6:24-5). Titus 1 sets the benchmarks of pastoral deportment that requires strong convictions, "holding fast the faithful word" (v 9) while censuring "pugnacious" (v 7) reactions or given to quarrel.

⁹ GRIF's Worship Pastor for eight years, Sharon Norman, is a good resource for ways to meaningfully involve people from a broad cultural spectrum in many aspects of the service. worship@grifonline.org.

responds to the word of God through which believers are edified, corrected, consoled (1 Cor 14:3) and sometimes unbelievers converted (vv 24-5). That response has both required expectation and free expression. Worship is the same for all, submitting ourselves to God in a life of joyful and trusting obedience to his Word. Worship expression, while in unison, allows freedom to reflect the variety of backgrounds as we naturally respond to the supernatural God. That is, each person stands before God "just as I am" and not as another. In a homogenous congregation, worship tends to be expressed in similar ways. A congregation composed of Asian, African, Anglo, European and Hispanic peoples, however, requires considerable latitude. Allow freedom then in bringing authentic worship to God. By doing so, the focal point of your celebration will be your common salvation, your one Lord and your corporate obedience. Ignoring freedom by requiring uniformity imposes a distraction, shifting the focus from Almighty God to the self-consciousness of worshipers. Like fashion, worship style reflects the natural bent of culture. Avoid then making the outward expressions of public worship a criterion for spiritual maturity.¹⁰ The stayed Dutchman and the demonstrative Italian may be equally wholehearted in their worship and pleasing to God.

Propel the Vision by Celebrating Progress

Think of refocusing your church as building a great cathedral involving several generations. So celebrate when every brick is laid. That wise counsel was given to us at the beginning by a denominational leader. Once the vision begins to be realized, showcase it to the congregation. Was there a tipping point when the people owned GRIF's mission, when the vision of the few became the conviction of the many? For the majority, it will be when they see it happening. The tipping point for GRIF came, in the view of this pastor, on the Sunday when our English students from the Wednesday

¹⁰ The exception is body language of contempt which is not about style but condition of heart.

English class stood before the congregation to receive a "Certificate of Achievement." A handheld microphone was passed from one student to the next as each simply gave a greeting and stated his or her name and country. Finally, GRIF's vision had faces and those faces were smiling! They were not products of imperialistic conquests of a neighborhood church. They came under no duress. They were happy. "My name is Marco. I come from Albania. I love GRIF. Thank you for helping me learn English." "My name is Esther. I love Pastor Joey. We love Jesus!" My name is Trinh. My family comes from Vietnam." In a span of 8 minutes, nine decades of whiteness that had been in that sanctuary faded into memory. Their beaming countenances combined with expressive joy caused something to resonate inside of us all, including many who had not been engaged. This was the day that some who had held back began saying "I'm proud of our church. Look what we're doing." It showed them that vision was happening. The number of volunteers for English class the following week increased dramatically.

Offset Impatience by Communicating Progress

Frustrations may be voiced by some over lagging progress, poor communication and how many "feel out of the loop." This is understandable, for in the early stages a relatively few are working diligently behind the scenes. The pitfall of impatience fatigue was voiced as "nothing seems to be happening and this is dragging on." When people complain they see little happening, it becomes necessary to give them information. "Vision Sunday" served that purpose. In the first of these, we unveiled the church's new name, highlighted places where we do see God working, pointed ahead to a strategy that is open-ended and called the people to pray. In a message, "What's Love Got to Do with It?" The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 5:43-48 challenged us to widen our friendship circles to prove who our Father is. This was more than a vision talk, but a

reality talk in which we admitted our own struggles while conveying an unwavering commitment to the vision.

Design a Solid Ideological Core

Design an ideological core as a charter that defines who you are and function as the church's "true North" to guide strategies, programs and structure. The church today is the product of decisions made a decade ago. Specifically, this philosophical core provided us with the help we needed to critically evaluate and streamline existing programs and activities as well as garner congregational involvement to increase impact. This will guard you against natural human tendencies to drift off course and revert back into old default modes of doing church. It prods us on to higher performance for God's glory.

Stay on Course and Keep it Moving

Even after the vision begins to gain speed, the old ways of doing things became like forces of gravity that kept pulling some back. Two years after we began, someone wrote on a survey, "If this doesn't work, when will we go back?" While vision cannot be coerced, its keepers must drill it through the organization at all levels so that it is widely owned. In doing so, anticipate some resistance to change. Form a team of people with the task of identifying about three of the most critical actions that your church must take to advance its mission. We named our team the Strategic Planning Committee.¹¹ This small group has been formed every three years and meets for about six months. Its Diagnostic tools helped to evaluate our congregation's current state of health by assessing various disciplines. As uncomfortable as this process was, it enabled leaders

¹¹ The pastor serves on the committee but we find that it is best for it to be chaired by someone who believes in the mission who is skilled in facilitating group process. In GRIF's case that person was Eva Schoon. At times it became difficult for this pastor to listen to the performance gaps in GRIF and easy to get defensive. Through this process, however, preaching series emerged aimed at growth areas with considerable precision.

to identify the performance gap between current and desired states. By identifying this gap in behavioral terms, we then shaped our preaching to raise the value of changes and programming to provide the how-to of change. Goals were established in two-year increments before another diagnostic test would be implemented. These measures do more than keep the church from sliding backwards. By establishing a handful of priorities, “critical success factors,” they boost performance by harnessing congregation involvement in a few crucial areas.

Honor the Past by Building on It

Tie the new vision to the church’s historic values and earlier outreach efforts. Spend time with senior adults who had served in areas of ministry. Learn from them the missional successes of the past. Supplement that information by studying past annual reports to learn of the contributions of previous pastors. In this way, the new pastor leads the congregation forward missionally in a unifying manner, humbly and gratefully as well as with courage and competence. At our church’s recent 100th anniversary celebration its four preceding pastors were present. Each one shared highlights from his pastorate and it was extremely inspiring. It became quickly apparent that GRIF was building on a long continuum of outreach and became an opportunity for this pastor to make the following statement: “GRIF is no better than First Church nor the present pastor better than previous ones. What has changed is not the commitment to our mission but the demographics of our context.” If this is only a pastor’s vision it will fail. If it is the work of God no one can stop it (Acts 4). Spend time with senior adults.

Educate Yourself about Foreign Residents

Acquaint yourself on the literature written by those that you want to reach. Read their books and articles, especially those describing the experiences they had in

migrating to the U.S. and adjusting to its culture.¹² This will give you information about their challenges and triumphs that they may never tell you in conversation. Supplement that reading with brief histories of their countries. Bank this information in a growing file and draw from it in preparation of social interaction. This discipline will close the foreignness gap, increase conversational inroads, develop sensitivity, remove possible stereotypes, humanize them, inform preaching and build trust.

Practice Hospitality but in Reverse

Hospitality typically consists of inviting people from another country or culture into the safety and fellowship of one's home. At the initial stage in welcoming strangers, this pastor recommends that you reverse the direction from them-to-you to you-to-them. Like the pattern of Jesus in his mobility, visit the homes of others and assume the lesser role as guest and honor them the host. Let them feed you and eat what is served. It has been our experience that by going to their home conversation becomes more fluent by the ambience of artifacts, pictures, books and wall-hangings that prominently adorn their living rooms. Before arriving, memorize a greeting in their language or write it on a piece of paper and read it to them.¹³ Faces typically light up at our feeble attempts at their language. Let them correct your pronunciation. Take with you a small gift. Emit the love of Jesus. On an initial visit, it is generally best to avoid commenting on such things as the Shahada brightly displayed in calligraphy on their wall, the smiling Buddha sitting on a shelf or a picture of Krishna or Laksmi. Revel in their generosity and let them do the same. By this action you show 'Level 1 belonging' presented in Chapter 4 by focusing

¹² For example, Bich Minh Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (NY: Penguin Books, 2007). Helen Zia, *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000). Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (NY: Little, Brown and Company, 1993).

¹³ In a country by country format, this author offers practical ideas for building friendships cross-culturally. Rajendra K. Pillai, *Reaching the World in Our Own Backyard* (Colorado Springs, CO: Waterbrook Press, 2003).

on the person rather than the label.

One caution is in order. Be wise in the information you share with others in the church from these house visits. Avoid majoring in or overreacting to differences in culture. If you hear something like, “We eat rats and cats” (actually heard and practiced by some of our members), never repeat it publically. It will shame strangers, especially alienate self-conscious teenagers and cause them to withdraw. ‘Level 2 belonging’ respects rather than insults one’s ethnic culture.

Understand the Currency of Value in the MEC and Pay the Price

The currency of value in the MEC is relational time more than money. Most of the issues foreigners face cannot be resolved by someone writing a check. Refugees who often become invisible to the larger society almost invariably welcome intentional recognition from those outside of their ethnic group. This will distinguish the community of Jesus from a social agency. An English student expressed it like this: “ESL is no longer a class, but our friends.” A precious Albanian woman named Esther described why she and her family made GRIF their home: “We could see that you at GRIF were busy people, with plenty to do. Yet you still gave us your time and opened your lives to us.” People came to English class expecting to get English. They got that, but they also found a friendly, safe place to belong. They did not expect baby showers, international dinners and picnics, volleyball and basketball, shopping trips for clothing, individual one-on-one English tutoring during the week, private volunteer driver’s training and riding ski-do’s on a lake. Relational time reduces awkwardness between strangers. It is hospitality at its third level of inclusion (Chapter 4) and carries mutual rewards.

Be Careful Not to Barge in with a Message

Show them the gospel before telling the gospel. As courtships typically precede proposals in romance so incarnation appears before proclamation in evangelism. To

every rule there are exceptions, of course, but the example of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 2:8 should be the norm. Apply the principle of the velvet-covered brick by delivering the gospel in life before in speech. That means magnanimously loving people where they are without judging their prior beliefs. Most of them have never had the gospel explained to them. For example, a recent *Making Sense of the Bible* class was attended by twenty Hindu adults from Bhutan. An amiable and lively discussion ensued on whether God is bounded from his creation or part of that creation. Despite the presence of two Hindu priests in the class, the discussion did not escalate into a heated debate. That is because the past eighteen months the GRIF community has embraced them, watched out for them and befriended them. We intentionally infuse a measure of levity in the classroom environment as well as solid instruction. One evening this pastor taught in a “topee” hat commonly worn by men in Nepalese culture to the pleasure of all. Despite this, when we came to reading Romans 1:25,¹⁴ given the images of deities that are in their puja rooms and local temple, this teacher felt his trepidation rising. Upon hearing this verse, through the Hindu interpreter, one of the three priests made a tender disclosure: “Please understand that we are not disagreeing with the Bible. We are only sharing what we have been taught. Tonight is the first time we have heard these teachings. This is new to us. We are trying to understand.” The point is, had that passage been communicated at the outset of our relationship, these kind of verses would likely have elicited a different reception.

Anticipate Inquiries about Proper Care for Undocumented Immigrants

Leaders of church and State both have ordained vocations for the general welfare (Rom 12; 13:1-4). What is the role of the church when undocumented

¹⁴ “For they exchanged the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator...” NASB.

immigrants attend its services or its English classes? Christians are expected to honor their country and its leaders (Rom 13:7) by paying taxes and obeying the law. GRIF's practice in these cases is to care for them and seek to lead them to Christ. Doing so, in the view of this pastor, breaks no law and does not constitute an act of treason.¹⁵ It rather extends compassionate friendship and avoids violating a higher law than the State! As believers, our first allegiance is not to the Declaration of Independence but to God through his declared revelation. When asked by a newspaper reporter recently about my views on immigration, it became an opportunity to witness to that higher authority of Scripture calling us to protect them, provide for them and enfold them into our circles of friendship. By doing so, GRIF has had the privilege of seeing one such family come to Christ and enfolded into the life of the church. We have accompanied them to see competent immigration attorneys to explore their legal options. If this family should be deported, they will return to their home countries as new creatures in Christ to spread the gospel there. They will always remember a church that acted like Jesus. If, however, the church simply acts as an arm of the government, once they are deported they are no better off then when they came. The point is, let Caesar be Caesar in providing a just society (Rom 13:1-7) and the church be the church in offering salvation to all (Rom 12:17-21).

Parting Words

The dual challenge of turning a homogenously populated congregation into an ethnically diverse congregation and of reaching out evangelistically to people of other

¹⁵ Taking the time to familiarize yourself with accurate information will prove invaluable in sifting facts from popular and emotionally-charged myths about immigration, both in terms of the law as well as its impact upon the American economy. Much useful information is available through the Immigration Policy Center of the American Immigration Council in Washington, DC at www.immigrationpolicy.org. Also helpful is an essay, "Immigration Basics," available through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops at www.justiceforimmigrants.org/immigration-basics.shtml, accessed December 14, 2010.

religions has many dimensions. Much boils down, however, to an observation made by Eva: "Relationships rule. People caught the vision when they met people and got involved."¹⁶ What hinders the formation of these relationships?

Refocusing an ethnically homogenous congregation will not be as difficult as one might imagine if its pastor and people slay two giant monsters dominating the imagination, Ditto and Fobos. Ditto is the behemoth of stereotype who sees people of a different hue or culture with what Webster calls "an unvarying form or pattern... having no individuality."¹⁷ He slaughters individuality with the club of generalizations, lumping people together into a mental box. By casting a one-dimensional image onto a three-dimensional being, he "gives himself permission to ignore them."¹⁸ Fobos, like Ditto, ignores the other but on a different basis. Wielding a sword of ethnocentricity he casts contempt upon all deviations from his own culture. Both giants disregard other ethnic groups and foreigners. Ditto says, "You are no different from the rest;" Fobos says, "You are so different from me." These giants exist only in the mind; nevertheless, they rise up to strike terror in the imagination and prevent the formation of authentic cross-cultural relationships. The longer they hide in their mythic castles of safety, sequestered with their own kind, the more monstrous they become.

This is hardly a peripheral issue. For the follower of Jesus, succumbing to these giants is impossible. To do so takes a sharp detour from his path as Peter took in Galatia (Gal 2:14) and contradicts the gospel. Our reticence to initiate cross-cultural relationships often mimics the lazy man in Proverbs with the preposterous excuse for staying inside because "there is a lion in the street!" (Prov 22:13; 26:13). We echo the

¹⁶ Eva S., First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

¹⁷ *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary*, 2d ed., s.v. "stereotype."

¹⁸ The author is indebted to Philip Rodebush serving in the Middle East who shared this expression in conversation, Oct, 2010.

ten spies returning from their reconnaissance mission in Canaan. They embellished their report with defeatist exaggeration, magnifying challenges and diminishing God's promise. It came with a tragic cost, inflicting paralysis upon God's people and the loss of a generation (Num 13:25-33). Ditto and Fobos rob the church of the delicacies of miraculous reconciliation just as those spies blocked Israel's access of the Promised Land with its rich delights. In light of everything Jesus did and taught, inter-racial standoffishness, self-contained bashfulness among evangelicals on both sides of the racial divide is worse than scandalous. It is pathetic and inexcusable. It is also curable. Just as the frightful behemoths come from the same mother, they meet their demise by the same weaponry. They will meet their fate when punctured with the most miniscule dosages of myth-crushing truth. That truth surfaces the moment we cross a border and enter the turf of the Other. Elaine N., senior adult and member of First Church for seven decades, when asked to identify her biggest surprise in the change, wrote: "How friendly they were."¹⁹

"the truth shall set you free..."

¹⁹ Elaine N., First Church Member Responses, Winter 2010.

APPENDIX 1

CHURCH PLANTING, CORPORATE SANCTIFICATION AND REFOCUS

The initial stage of this journey is best understood against the larger picture of what was happening at First Church. This section is placed in the Appendix because it contains elements that are unique to GRIF rather than for reasons of having secondary importance. First Church (FC) planted two new churches at the same time as refocusing itself. What is not unique to FC are the spiritual principles that brought greater willingness to make sacrifices in both ventures, that of starting new churches and transitioning FC into an ethnically inclusive body. These played a significant role both in pastor and people and are described below.

At the completion of this pastor's graduate studies in world religion, the plan was for our family to relocate to a more diverse city from which to launch a global ministry aimed at training Christian leaders with theological tools for reaching out to people of other faiths. That plan, however, was challenged when the lead pastor of First Church resigned and this author was invited to interview for the position. There was not the slightest inkling to do so. The invitation was politely but emphatically refused. While emotionally connected to the church through friendships, we had resolved ourselves to doing only mission work. I did agree, however, to fill the pulpit during their pastoral search. God used two events during that interim period to overcome that firm reluctance.

First, the Church Board had asked the founder of New Church Specialties, Larry McKain, to envision with them church planting possibilities over a weekend in late December 1999. As supply pastor, the invitation had been extended to me to attend and observe these meetings. At their conclusion, they unanimously voted, even without a senior pastor in place, to plant two new congregations that coming fall. Two full-time

pastors on the First Church staff – the only two – felt called to pastor these congregations. The Church Board was now giving them full access to its membership with the freedom to recruit anyone in the congregation to join them in these new ventures of faith. The atmosphere was euphoric. Their courageous sacrifice that day was profoundly moving.

A week later it was the privilege of this author to deliver the news to the gathered church. Expecting the congregation to jump to its feet with thunderous applause over such a kingdom advancing announcement, this pastor was stunned when panic set in and could be heard in the hallways following the service. “Everyone will leave the church. We’re not strong enough yet. This decision is going to kill First Church!” The rush of euphoria from that weekend began to seep out of my spirit. What remained, however, was the conviction that the Board had heard from God and made a God-honoring decision. Taken back by these reactions, it was a desperate moment calling for a divine motion prompting this author to beg God for matching scriptural support to dissolve our human fears and help the church to embrace the decision of its leaders. That answer came through the prayer of Jesus for the church in John 17 and his commission in John 20:21-23. Specifically, Jesus asked that his disciples to be set apart and sent out according to the pattern that he had previously established (John 10:36) and later became the backdrop for his commission to the church in John 20:21-23. Read in the thematic current of the book, John 20:21 highlights an interplay of two divine actions, “sanctifying” (*hagiasmo*) and “sending” (*pempo*) that had brought his own ministry into being (John 10:36). His unbroken path of obedience involved a series of critical choices leading him through phases of his commissioned assignment. It started

with intimate belonging in the warm fellowship in the presence of his Father.¹ Out of that bond to his Father's heart came a decisive consecration to his Father's plan for the world,² a project calling for his physical relocation.³ It also involved costly sacrifice on behalf of lost people,⁴ a total emptying of self but followed by a culminating reconciliation with the promise of glorious return for Jesus.⁵ Each stage emerged from the one directly preceding it. That is, out of Jesus' intimate attachment to his Father came his voluntary consecration. Out of that act of total surrender came his risky relocation. In the midst of that resettlement he gave his ultimate self-sacrifice on behalf of all. Finally, arising out of that sacrifice emerged not only a personally vindicating restoration from the earth but a global provision on its behalf, one that resulted in multiplied abundance. Each transition required personal choice.

The individual career of Jesus became the corporate pattern for the church. It carried concrete ramifications for mission in the area of church planting and GRIF's ministry. Church planting became an act of corporate sanctification to describe a congregation that decisively places the propagation of the gospel before the perpetuation of its programs.⁶ Metaphorically, it is the collective seed that lets itself fall

¹ The Fourth Gospel is replete with references to this relationship. Intimate love between (a) the Father and the Son: John 1:1-2, 18; esp. 3:35; 5:20; 14:31 and (b) Christ and the church: John 1:12-13, 16; 13:1, 34; esp. 15:9, 12-14; 14:23; 16:27; 17:6, 9, 13, 26 (1 John 3:1, 16).

² Decisive consecration on the part of (a) Jesus, the Son: John 10:36; 8:29; cf. the temporal aspect, esp. Heb 10:5-10; and (b) believers: John 4:34; esp. 17:17-18.

³ Relocation of (a) the Son from the intimate presence of the Father into the world for its sake: esp. John 1:1, 14; 3:16-17; 10:36; 12:46; and (b) believers from their safe community into their lost culture: esp. John 17:17-18; 18:37.

⁴ Sacrifice of (a) the Son for the salvation of others: John 3:16; esp. 12:23-24, 27, 32; 18:11; (b) believers for the salvation of others: esp. John 12:23-26; 13:14-17; 15:18-20.

⁵ Life fully lived in response to the obedience of (a) the Son: esp. John 16:28; 17:5, 13, 24; 20:17; and of (b) believers: John 14:2-3, 18.

⁶ We do not take this to mean cancelling our obligation to building up the body of Christ, but to integrate edification with costly sacrifice on behalf of people who are spiritually lost, emotionally broken and socially forgotten.

and be dissolved into the soil so that the subtraction of one can produce the multiplication of many from death to life into glory. Strategically, it simply continues the saving work of Jesus through the sacrificial way of Jesus.⁷

This framework answered some questions for us and put a new lens on “everyone is going to leave the church.” We began making distinctions between people “leaving the church” and “going to plant a new church.” People “leave” by moving from what they perceive to be a deficit to a fullness. Pastors know the litany: “No youth group here, great one over there; bad music here, awesome music there,” and countless more. “Going,” by contrast, also involves relocation but one proceeding from an authentic fullness to a true deficit. Running on the “sanctified and sent” template, “going” involved an obedient departure from a security suffused with love into an arena of desperation in which people are “without hope and without God in the world.” Going is for the satisfied, leaving for the irritated.

That day sealed my heart with this congregation. Love for a congregation, however, is not enough to stay. The second catalyst came three months later when a Board member took me aside and raised probing questions: “Have you looked closely at the demographics of this community around the church? [I had not.] If you believe God is calling you to a global ministry that equips Christian leaders in reaching out to people from other religions, why not let First Church be your laboratory? We feel called to reach our community in which international people now reside. You feel called to reach your world. Why can’t your vision somehow mesh with ours?” His questions framed the issues in a missional way causing something inside of me to click. There would be no

⁷ This connection corrects a flawed tendency that privatizes sanctification in the life of the believer. It does so by making it a preliminary requisite of empowerment for carrying out God’s redeeming work in the world. Christ’s prayer underscores sanctification’s defensive provision as a protection against worldiness (John 17:15) but enlarges its scope to ensure that the positive provisions of grace flow out through his followers into the world God loves. Jesus knew that without the sanctification of the church it would be self-obsessed and there would be no salvation of the world.

other way to justify remaining in a city that was already home to a thousand churches.⁸

First Church turned a historic corner when in October 2000 it “sent” 35 strong members to the city of Rockford located eight miles to its north and on November 1 another 35 strong members to Byron Center, 10 miles south. In the church-saturated and yet post-church setting of West Michigan, that original core of 70 has multiplied seventeen-fold. Most of those attending the new plants previously attended no church. Some of the initial naysayers saw their own unsaved or backslidden adult children return to the journey of faith. Both congregations have far outgrown their mother. The naysayers were right. Old First Church did die. It ceased being old First Church and was resurrected by the Spirit into something new, an international fellowship. But we learned how the Head of the church truly preserves it, even at age 92, when it follows the template of Christ by dying to itself so that others may live. For the present study, these passages that provided First Church with the needed impetus to plant two churches also had a direct impact on the refocusing effort of the mother church. The painful absence of many familiar faces in those early days was more than compensated as the mother church reflected the radiance of her Lord.

Fathers’ Day, 2000, became this author’s first Sunday as senior pastor. An article in a church periodical, “Church Seeks God’s Direction at Ninety-One,” published March 11, 2001. Eva Schoon, just hired as the new church Administrator, captured the fusion:

In 1998, a new vision and focus for the ministries of Grand Rapids First Church of the Nazarene was determined... This plan was two-fold – to update our current facility and to start new churches in other parts of the city. Last year we sensed God leading us to expand upon that vision. As a result, we have added a third component – to purposefully reach people in our community from all cultural backgrounds. We desire to blend many cultures into one congregation of consolidated praise rather than having segregated pockets of churches – African

⁸ The District Superintendent lent his enthusiastic approval to the changes that would be necessary for First Church to refocus into a multicultural and international body and for its pastor to share a global teaching role.

American, White, Asian, Hispanic, etc... Pending approval, on October 7, 2001 we will change the name of the church to Grand Rapids International Fellowship – A Church of the Nazarene.⁹

⁹ Eva Schoon, *Vision Sunday News*, March 11, 2001, 1.

APPENDIX 2

GRAND OPENING INVITATION CARD

Have you noticed?



International
Grand Rapids **Fellowship**
A Church of the Nazarene

Things are changing in our neighborhood!

It used to be that we had to travel the world to meet interesting people from other cultures. That is no longer true. Today, people from all around the world are moving into our community. As we live and work with our international friends, our lives are enriched.

We have a dream. We want to be a neighborhood church where people from all cultures worship together. In fact, we are so committed to this dream we have changed our name. We invite you to come hear more.

Grand Opening Service **Sunday, January 20, at 10:00 a.m.**

Child care provided

3765 Kalamazoo Ave SE
Grand Rapids, MI 49508
616 245-2151

(We are the church with the playground in front)

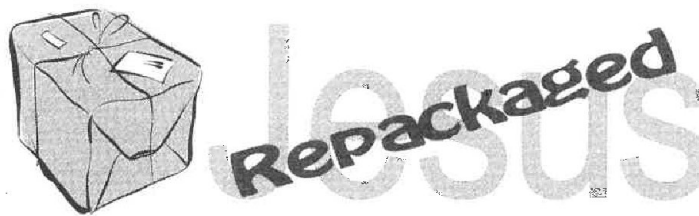
Be our guest for lunch at our International Food Court

APPENDIX 3

REPACKAGED JESUS SERMON SERIES MAILER



3765 Kalamazoo Avenue Southeast
Grand Rapids, MI 49508



Join us for this exciting series!

Who ever imagined that Jesus would cause so much controversy? There is growing confusion in our world over religion as traditional views of Jesus are conflicting with other religious beliefs and historical theories. Are you curious about the different portrayals of Jesus? How have these questions challenged the Biblical view of Him? We invite you to come and explore these questions with us at Grand Rapids International Fellowship.



Sunday, March 19
Jesus & Hinduism
How does Lord Krishna of the *Bhagavad-Gita* compare to Jesus?

Sunday, March 26
Jesus & Buddha
Buddha and Jesus in their earliest scriptures—how do they compare?



Sunday, April 2
Jesus & Muhammad
How does the Islamic view of Jesus compare with the Biblical view? Can both be true?



Sunday, April 9
Jesus & Da Vinci
Are the theories found in *The Da Vinci Code* historically true? What does the Bible have to say about its claims?

Easter Sunday, April 16
Jesus & Me
Who do you say that He is?



GRAND RAPIDS INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIP
SUNDAYS AT 10 AM

3765 KALAMAZOO AVE SE, GRAND RAPIDS, MI 49508; PHONE: (616) 245-2151

APPENDIX 4

DEFINITION OF TERMS RELATED TO IMMIGRANTS

A few definitions of immigrants and refugees are in order. Glenn Rogers who has been serving in this field for years and completed formal study offers clear descriptions:

Immigrant: Someone who is not born in this country who comes to live in this country. The term should not be considered negative or derogatory in any way...

First Generation Immigrant: Someone who is an adult when they leave their home culture to immigrate to a new country.

Generation 1.5: Someone who is not an adult when they immigrate (usually with their parents) to a new culture. This is somewhat of a fuzzy concept. Obviously someone who is seventeen when he or she immigrates is not yet an adult (by American standards) but is more of an adult than a child and would most likely be considered a first generation immigrant. A child, however, from infancy to early teens, should be counted as a generation 1.5. The distinction between generation 1 and 1.5 is important because it is easier for a child to learn and adapt to the new culture than it is for an adult. The older the immigrant, the harder the acculturation and assimilation processes are.

Generation 2: The American-born children of generation 1 or 1.5s – children born after immigration has occurred.

Enculturation: The process of learning one's own culture as a child.

Acculturation: The process of learning a second culture later in life.

Assimilation: The intentional process of engaging in a new culture, becoming part of the mainstream of the new society one has adopted.¹

¹ Glenn Rogers, *Evangelizing Immigrants: Outreach and Ministry Among Immigrants and their Children* (Mission and Ministry Resources, 2006), 10-11.

APPENDIX 5

MAKING SENSE OF THE BIBLE

Making Sense of the Bible **Life's BIG Questions**

Wednesdays, 6:30—7:30 PM

October 6 - November 3

Session 1: CREATION (Oct 6)
Who am I and why am I here?

Session 2: EVIL (Oct 13)
What's wrong with me and my world?

Session 3: GOD'S COMMANDS (Oct 20)
What does God require of me?

Session 4: JESUS (Oct 27)
How can I know peace?

Session 5: AFTERLIFE (Nov 3)
What happens to me after I die?



This five-week class introduces the Bible
and its main teaching.

Everyone is invited!

3765 Kalamazoo Ave SE,
Grand Rapids, MI 49508

APPENDIX 6

PRAYER GUIDE FOR MINISTERS OF THE WORD

“When God’s people pray specifically,
He answers those prayers specifically.”

--Dwayne Buhler, Mexico City

Spiritual Receptivity¹ -- God’s Word received in short time period

2 Thessalonians 3:1

Example: Acts 19:20; 1 Thess 2:13

Open Doors -- God-led opportunities for truth-encounters

Colossians 4:2-3

Examples: Acts 14:27; 23:11; Philippians 1:12-14

Fluency and Courage to Speak Up -- Give the message without faltering, hesitation and fear

Ephesians 6:19-20

Example: Acts 28:31

Clarity in Cross-Cultural Conversations -- Salvation message to be clearly understood

Colossians 4:4-5

Protection -- God’s power will guard me from spiritual, physical or mental harm

2 Thessalonians 3:2-3

Romans 15:30-32

Example: Philippians 1:12-14

Guarded from Discouragement -- God’s love will motivate through all four quarters

2 Thessalonians 3:5 (2:16-17; 1 Thess 2:8)

Cooperation with Other Ministries -- Spirit of unity become evident among Christian workers

Romans 16:17; John 17:23; 1 Corinthians 1:10; 3:6-9

Global Obedience & Exuberant Doxology – God’s glory will fill the earth

Romans 1:5; 16:25-27

¹ Adapted from Duane Buhler, “Paul’s Missionary Prayer Requests: Scriptural Principles of Praying for Missionaries,” *Evangelical Missions Quarterly* 40, (January 2004): 44-51.

APPENDIX 7

RENE PADILLA ON THE HOMOGENOUS UNIT PRINCIPLE (HUP)

Rene Padilla, an evangelical pastor in Buenos Aires and General Secretary of the Latin American Theological Fraternity, presents impressive theological arguments against the Homogenous Unit Principle (HUP) in an essay, "The Unity of the Church and the Homogenous Unit Principle."¹ He presents a perspective often overlooked in popular evangelicalism by emphasizing not only the scope of salvation – "whosoever will may come" – (standard fare for evangelicals), but the community of salvation. Solidarity is the ruling concept dominating both his anthropology and soteriology. That is, the gospel of reconciliation begins with original solidarity -- the Hebrew concept of human solidarity (by birth with Adam into a "oneness of judgment...sin and death" and by grace joined with the last Adam through whom "a new humanity comes into existence in which the results of the fall are undone and God's original purpose for humanity is fulfilled."²) It culminates in a final solidarity with God's purpose of "recapitulation" in Christ (Eph 1:10, 13-14). The Church is the community of the Last Adam that lives "between the time of his first and last coming." The very nature of the kingdom judges the church in any age that uncritically adopts the fallen normalcies of its surrounding culture, redirecting it toward what it will fully become at Christ's *parousia*.

Connecting the corporate beginning in Adam and cosmic finale in Christ is a communal middle in the Spirit, a reference to the placement of the age of the Spirit. The pneumatological basis of ecclesiology is that "at Pentecost, again, not individualistic" but "every nation under heaven" was present and "in one single event ... even the linguistic

¹ Rene C. Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1985), 142-69.

² Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 143.

barriers were miraculously broken down for the sake of the spread of the gospel 'to the end of the earth' (Acts 1:8). The Holy Spirit makes the impossible a living reality.³ Where "solidarity" dominates Padilla's ecclesiological framework, "concrete reality" is everywhere demanded of its application. By concrete, he means allegiance to Christ and "a community that was held together by a common commitment to him [Christ], a community that was able to overcome all the differences that could have separated them."⁴ The demographic makeup of the newly-birthing church in Jerusalem made this miracle at Pentecost far more than a nice ideal but a concrete living reality: "Not racial homogeneity but Pentecost was the basis of their unity."

Was this Jerusalem church simply a group of ethnically-determined house churches? Padilla counters that view (as held by Peter Wagner), showing that the evidence of the Pentecost-born church was that the "believers were 'together' (*epi to auto* in Acts 2:44), that they had 'all things in common' (2:44; 4:32), and that they were "of one heart and soul" (4:32).⁵ Yet Padilla recognizes the challenges, acknowledging that the multiethnic congregation hardly represents the default-mode of societal group dynamics.⁶ If the MEC is so difficult a project, then why fight for it? For Padilla, it is the true gospel. He calls today's church away from the rule of pragmatic success that we euphemistically call "strategic considerations" in matters of growth. Trumping everything

³ "Only in the light of the outpouring of the Spirit are we able to understand how it was possible for the early Jerusalem church to include in its constituency both 'unlearned and ignorant men' and on the other hand (*agrammatotai...kai idiotai* in Acts 4:13; *hamme ha'aretz*, "people of the land" in rabbinic terminology) and educated priests (6:7) on the other hand – and at a later stage, Pharisees (15:5; 11:2); both poor people in need of help and wealthy landlords (2:44-45; 4:32-37), possibly members of a well-to-do foreign community; both Jews – Aramaic-speaking Jews, mostly from Palestine, as well as "Hellenists," Greek-speaking Jews from the Dispersion (6:1ff) – and at least one Gentile, from Syrian Antioch (v. 5)." Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 148.

⁴ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 147.

⁵ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 149.

⁶ "The extension of the gospel to the Gentiles was such a difficult step for the Jerusalem church that it took place only with the aid of visions and commands (Acts 8:26ff; 10:1-16) or under the pressure of persecution (8:1ff; 11:19-20)." Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 150.

else is the nature of the gospel rather than the short-lived shortcuts that bring numerical gains. He points back to Peter in the house of Cornelius where he declared that “God shows no partiality,” hardly a belief embraced by his ethnocentric Jewish peers nor Roman society at large. This new gospel did not build on existing convictions, however cherished or widespread, but upstaged them.⁷

The ruling factor over individual preferences and conventional thinking in society is the nature of the gospel and salvation. Padilla shows how this was demonstrated dramatically in the confrontation between Paul and Peter that occurred in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14). Peter embodied the modern American HUP that divorces practice from truth, confessing catholicity while practicing ethnic segregation. For Paul (and Padilla), merely paying lip-service to a creed “denies the truth of the gospel.” The early church faced a real danger of dividing “into two denominations – a Jewish Church and a Gentile Christian church” each with its own emphases, serving its own homogeneous unit.”⁸ The concrete ecclesiastical resolution to this conflict and surrounding controversies over table fellowship, circumcision and kosher laws, was the convening of the Jerusalem Council and the written decree that ensued. The “Jerusalem Decree”⁹ supplied necessary traction for truth as it traveled across slippery Judaizing terrain into new cultures and nations, guiding the church and creating a new ethos of cultural heterogeneity.

⁷ “As long as Jewish Christians allowed inherited prejudices to persist, probably because of their fear that this contact with Gentiles might be interpreted by fellow Jews as an act whereby they were ‘traitorously joining a strange people’ (to borrow McGavran’s expression) they could preach ‘to none except Jews.’ Who would have thought that their approach, based on such a limited outlook, would be used as a pattern for evangelism in the twentieth century?” Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 151.

⁸ Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 155.

⁹ “The ‘Jerusalem Decree’ provided the basis for Jewish and Gentile Christians to live in unity, as equal members of the body of Christ. It clearly exemplifies the apostolic practice in the face of problems arising out of racial, cultural, and social differences among Christians.” Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 155.

APPENDIX 8

FIVE DEGREES OF BELONGING: TAKING RELATIONSHIPS TO THE NEXT LEVEL

Social connections have been critical to GRIF's outreach and upbuilding. At each stage, we aim to create a sense of connection.

Level 1 Belonging: HUMANITY – United to the Human Race

Point of cohesion: We belong by reason of creation. There is only one Family Tree.

Identifying Signs of Belonging: Sharing life together

Key passages:

Genesis 1:26-28: God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Acts 17:26-27 ESV: And he [God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel their way toward him and find him. Yet he is actually not far from each one of us...

2 Corinthians 5:15-17: For the **love of Christ controls us**, because we have concluded this: that **one has died for all**, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. **From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh.** ...Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. (Christ Judge of all [v 10] ...Christ died for all)

GRIF's Actions/Attitudes to create sense of connection:

1. View each person as valuable in the eyes of God as his image-bearer. Made to seek God, each is redeemable by the grace of God.
2. Drop the tags of religion and class. Humanize rather than compartmentalize.
3. Practice hospitality toward strangers – “love of the stranger” (Rom 12: 9; Heb 13:3; 1 Pet 4:10f)
4. Make friends. Friendship is a subset of humanity. Friends are united by common values and interests. The more we know about a person, the more that we become united by shared experiences.
5. Velvet-covered brick: Show, tell, invite. “With-ness” leads to witness.
6. Introduce international people by their countries, not their religions.

Level 2 Belonging: ETHNIC FAMILY – United by Ancestry

Point of Cohesion: Belong by a common ancestor. Originate from the same branch on the Family Tree

Identifying Signs of Cohesion: similar food, language, history, worldview, cultures [that is, people can often tell where we are from by these behaviors, etc.]

Key passages:

1. **Diversity By Design** – Differences arise from the combination of a creative God and by virtue of geography, language, and culture. They express obedience, not digression.

God's Command at the Beginning

"Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" – Genesis 1:28 ESV

God's Command After the Flood

And you, be fruitful and multiply, teem on the earth and multiply in it." Genesis 9:7 ESV

Now be fruitful and multiply, and repopulate the earth." NLT

Obedience of the Sons of Noah – Genesis 10

From these the coastland peoples [Japheth] spread in their lands, each with his own language, by their clans, in their nations (v 5).

These are the sons of Ham, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations. These are the sons of Shem, by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations (vv 30-31)

These are the clans of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, in their nations, and from these the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood (v 32).

2. **Division by Defiance** – Arrogant Defiance against God – Tower of Babel -- Genesis 11

God's Response: Judgment of Confusion and Dispersion

Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another's speech." So the Lord dispersed them from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore its name was called Babel, because there the Lord confused the language of all the earth. And from there the Lord dispersed them over the face of all the earth (vv 7-9).

GRIF's Actions/Attitudes to create sense of connection: Cross boundaries with a new recognition (example: Peter the Jew to Cornelius the Roman, Acts 10)

1. Principle of respect –

- a. International – avoid insult
- b. Indigenous Minorities – Understand their plight (history/present), affirm their place (creation), celebrate their inclusion (through the blood of Jesus)

2. Sensitivity training in cross-cultural settings

3. Demonstrate magnanimity of spirit. Don't add fuel to the fire. Dispel interethnic distance created by stereotyping, ethnocentricity, prejudice with truth and love.
4. Move from fear to hospitality. Exchange human prejudices with godly impartiality –

Peter in Acts 10:28; 34-35 NIV, addressing an audience of a different ethnic background:

"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean. ... "I now realize how true it is that **God does not show favoritism** but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.

5. Believe the solution: By the blood of Jesus, God destroyed "enmity" while protecting "ethnicity"

Level 3 Belonging: SPIRITUAL – United to the Body of Christ

Point of cohesion: Belong by reason of being acquired at great cost into "the church of God which He [Christ] purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28 NASB).

Identifying Actions of Cohesion: New walk of obedience

Key passages: Ephesians 4:4: "keep the unity of the Spirit..." [Gal 4:4-6; Rom 8:15]

GRIF's Actions/Attitudes to create connection: Build a community of grace by "one anothering"

ACTIONS OF A MAGNETIC FELLOWSHIP

1. **Love one another;** as I have loved you – John 13:34; 15:12, 17; 1 Thess 4:9; 1 John 3:11 [#1 commandment!] ; 1 John 3:23; 2 John 1:5
 - i. To show you are from God – "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God" – 1 John 4:7
 - ii. To fulfill your obligation – "if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" – 1 John 4:11
 - iii. To make the invisible God conspicuous – "No one has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us" – 1 John 4:12
 - iv. To extend mercy to struggling friends – "love one another fervently with a pure heart [for love will cover a multitude of sins," – 1 Peter 4:8; 1:22

2. Openly Express Love

Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love—Rom 12:10
love as brothers, be tenderhearted, courteous – 1 Peter 3:8
be kind to one another, tenderhearted – Eph 4:32

3. Stimulate God's Nearness by Humility – Show Class. Brag on Others

in honor giving preference to one another – Rom 12:10
be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility [you younger people, submit yourselves to your elders], for "God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble" – 1 Peter 5:5

4. Be Magnanimous rather than Petty

don't judge one another (on secondary matters) – Rom 14:13

5. Be a Border Crosser, Go Out of Your Way to Include the Outsider

welcome one another, just as Christ welcomed you – Rom 15:7
greet one another – Rom 16:16
be hospitable to one another without grumbling – 1 Peter 4:10

6. Stimulate Godliness with Truth and Grace [opposite of "covering" sins, but assisting]

admonish one another (filled with goodness, filled with all knowledge) – Rom 15:14
teaching and admonishing one another in psalms, hymns and spiritual psalms [with the word of Christ dwelling in you richly] – Col 3:16
exhort one another daily...lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin – Heb 3:13; 10:25
consider one another in order to stir up love and good works – Heb 10:24

7. Use God-given Skills and Abilities to Help Others

serve one another through love – Gal 5:13
minister to one another as each one has received a gift, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God – 1 Peter 4:10

8. Cultivate a Life of Tolerance; Forgive Imperfect People when they Let you Down

forgive one another just as Christ forgave you [if anyone has a complaint against another] – Eph 4:32; Col 3:13
bear with one another – Col 3:13
do not grumble against one another – James 5:9
do not speak evil of one another – James 4:11
confess your trespasses to one another – James 5:16
be of one mind, having compassion for one another – 1 Peter 3:18

9. Encourage Each Other

comfort one another [with biblical hope] ... Edify one another – 1 Thess 4:18; 5:11

10. Lift People Up by Name in Prayer

pray for one another – James 5:16

PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR BELONGING: *What is required for fellowship with other believers?*

“But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” – 1 John 1:7

“If you praise the same God I praise, we may have different mothers, but we have the same Father.” David Anderson

Level 4 Belonging: DISCIPLED – United by the body of Christian truth

Point of Cohesion: Belong by grounding in the content of Christian faith

Identifying Actions of Cohesion:

Key passages: Ephesians 4:16: “...until you reach the unity of the faith”

Colossians 2:6-8: “So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught ... See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy ...”

GRIF's Actions/Attitudes to create sense of connection: Submit to the discipline of learning

1. Create pathways of learning
 - a. Essentials of the Christian Faith
 - b. Triads or Singapore Model
 - c. *Making Sense of the Bible*
 - d. *Bible Study: Why Should I? How Can I?*
 - e. Other
2. Identify and train trainers
3. Encourage and expect personal responsibility

Level 5 Belonging: DISCIPLE-MAKER – United by a Common Mission

Point of cohesion: Belong by reason of maturity (Spiritual parent—able to multiply)

Key passages: Matthew 28:19f; 2 Timothy 2:2

GRIF's Actions/Attitudes to create sense of connection: Form teams of ministry and strategic mission

1. Mentor others in the faith
2. Meet together regularly to work together on a common cause. It forms a deeper relationship

APPENDIX 9

HERMAN BAVINCK AND JOHN WESLEY: COMMON AND PREVENIENT GRACE COMPARED

Outreach efforts to GRIF's religious neighbors, as noted in Chapter 2, are shaped in part by a Wesleyan understanding of prevenient grace. Of interest here is how this view compares with common grace as set forth by Reformed theology. Herman Bavinck, a nineteenth-century neo-Calvinist, wrote a superb essay on common grace¹ from which we will note in broad strokes what these conceptions share in common and where they diverge.

Definitions and Purposes

Common grace is placed in the category of divine providence for all creatures great and small, near and far to the covenant. It serves to sustain fallen society to the glory of the Creator of all things. It legitimatizes creation and sanctions all of life in a way that sets straight the pious who tend to compartmentalize the world into categories of sacred and profane. It further provides theological justification for Christian involvement in every human sector. Distinct from its prevenient counterpart, common grace functions as a means of diffusive cultural and cosmological redemption while "particular grace" alone stands at the service of human redemption.

Common grace tempers, yet is built squarely upon the providential comforts sounded forth in the Belgic Confession² as well as complying with features of the First Head of Doctrine of the Canons of Dort³ which assign grace and justice to the elect and

¹ Raymond C. Van Leeuwen (trans.), "Herman Bavinck's 'Common Grace,'" *Calvin Theological Journal* 24, No. 1, (Apr 1989): 35-65.

² Belgic Confession, Article 16, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions* (Grand Rapids: CRC Publications, 1988), 94-95.

³ The Canons of Dort, I, Articles 6-10, 15-16, *Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions*, 122-29.

reprobate respectively. It serves as God's gracious intervention on behalf of the latter, suspending his perfect justice for a time so that even the reprobate may taste of God's gracious gifts.

Prevenient grace, according to Wesley, is a subset of soteriology along with the atonement of Christ and justification by faith. In short form, it may be understood as grace in pursuit. It is an active force rather than a passive ontology or a still ambience divinely imprinted upon the created order. Through its impressions upon the conscience by means of law and upon the eye through nature, fallen creatures are made to hear the voice of their gracious Tracker. Through his redemption for Adam's degenerate race, free grace avails for all and now through the Spirit summons the response of faith from all. For Wesley, this was requisite readiness for the message of the gospel. Prevenient grace lies at the front edge of regeneration like a porch upon which one must stand before entering the house of salvation. Thus it is God's ordained way to human redemption.⁴

For Calvinism, while all grace has a common source, it strictly divides into dual streams of common and particular. Special grace may be likened to a rich egg yolk by which the elect is created and nurtured. Common grace covers the surrounding expansive egg white by the God who remains faithfully bound to all he has fashioned. New to this student was how the white and the yellow do not blend. It is true that the elect may reap the benefits of common grace, but the yoke of special grace is reserved by God solely for his elect. In the Wesleyan system, God breaks the yoke, allowing the

⁴ Wesleyan scholar Colin Williams explains, "Wesley insisted on the one hand that man cannot move himself toward God, being entirely dependent upon God's enabling grace. But he also insisted that man is responsible before God for his own salvation, being free to accept or reject him. Wesley holds these two together without resorting to any form of Pelagianism, by his twin doctrines of original sin and prevenient grace ... Because of original sin, the natural man is "dead to God" and unable to move toward God or respond to him. It is through the work of prevenient grace that he is given the power to respond or resist. Prevenient grace creates within us the power to accept faith or refuse it." Colin Williams, *John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1960), p. 42.

merits of Christ's atonement to flow out and through the speaking Spirit, making an entrance into the kingdom a genuine possibility for anyone.

Both systems have much to commend them. But they reveal that the distinguishing feature of Wesley was not a doctrine of "free will," as commonly thought, but of "free grace" – the belief that the yoke has been pounded and the stream of grace flows from the center to the circumference, potentially saving all. In practical terms this wide accessibility finds a correlation in an expanded evangelistic field of local mission.

Common & Prevenient Grace: Overlapping Themes

1. Sin is foreign to the original fabric of the created order and must not be considered as integral to it. Ascribing evil to the created order, then, must be dismissed as sub-Christian. The Incarnation confirms this idea, for God could assume humanity without sin. Sin is not a "thing" to be removed like a bad tooth. Rather, it is a spiritual power that grips all people at their ethical core or being, infecting all their thoughts and actions.
2. Traces of the image of God continue in every person regardless of religious belief, gender, social standing, age, or race. Because of this fact, he or she may achieve many noble and commendable things. "We cannot deny the true, good, and beautiful that one may see in mankind outside of Christ" (Calvin).
3. Common grace is "the working of the Holy Spirit in all creation. God interposed common grace between sin and the creation; a grace that does not inwardly renew, but restrains and compels." In it, God "averts the legal consequences of the curse."
4. Salvation comprehends this life as well as the next.⁵
5. Jesus Christ, according to Wesley, came "to destroy the works of the devil" so that he might restore the works of God. The Savior of the world is, of necessity, the Creator of it in a similar vein that an owner of a Toyota in disrepair will not likely seek the assistance of a Chevrolet dealership. The most qualified restorer of a humanity that has turned away from its original design and, in the process, become tragically severed from his primary life source is its manufacturer.
6. Grace aims to restore nature in general and humanity in particular to what God first intended. Sanctification for Wesley, then, became "God's humanizing

⁵ John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 6, *Wesley's Sermons* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978; reprinted from the 1872 edition), 509.

grace.”⁶ Sin is deviation from that which is humane. One who is genuinely holy is never an oddity except perhaps in quantitative terms as a rare individual. Such a person is instead most fully human. Jesus personified this truth, and even now exemplifies it within us, as the “new Man” whose image graces the redeemed (Eph 4:23).

7. Nature in its final condition will exceed the resplendence of its original state in much the same way that a perfectly restored classic from the salvage yard carries more glory than when it first gleamed on the showroom floor, a trophy to its blessed Restorer.⁷

Many additional similarities are striking. Both of these systems of common and prevenient grace speak of a divine *charis* on behalf of all fallen creatures. It follows that both proponents disavow the idea of “natural” theology, ascribing instead all residual goodness in human virtue to God’s grace alone.⁸ They further overlap at the point of the beneficiary, namely, humanity in sin, as well as the benefactor, the unflappable Father of Heavenly Lights (Jas 1:17).

⁶ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978). Former professor, Nazarene Theological Seminary and sister to Carl Bangs.

⁷ Expressed in the hymnology of Charles Wesley, *And Can it Be*, in a triumphant celebration of grace, “That I, a child of hell, should in His image shine!”

⁸ E.g., Wesley’s description of *free conscience*: “This faculty seems to be what is usually meant by those who speak of natural conscience; an expression frequently found in some of our best authors, but yet not strictly just. For though in one sense it may be termed natural, because it is found in all men; yet properly speaking, it is not natural, but a supernatural gift of God, above all his natural endowments. No, it is not nature, but the Son of God, that is ‘the true light, which enlightens every man that cometh into the world.’ So we may say to every human creature, ‘He,’ not nature, ‘has shown you, O man, what is good.’ And it is his Spirit who gives you an inward check, who causes you to feel uneasy, when you walk in any instance contrary to the light which He has given you.” John Wesley, “On Conscience,” *The Works of John Wesley*, vol. 7, *Wesley’s Sermons*, 187-88.

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VITA

Joseph Paul Knight, born October 13, 1951, Winfield, Kansas, U.S.A.

FAMILY

Pam (wife) and Jordan, Kimberly and Kyle (children)

EDUCATION

D.Min. Residency Studies, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, South Hamilton, Massachusetts, January 2007 – May 2011 (expected graduation)

Th.M., 2000. Calvin Theological Seminary, Systematic theology with some missiology, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Institute for Holy Land Studies and City of David dig, Jerusalem, Israel, 1981.

M.Div., 1977. Nazarene Theological Seminary, Kansas City, Missouri

B.A., 1973. Mid-America Nazarene College, Olathe, Kansas

PASTORAL ASSIGNMENTS

2000 – Present, Grand Rapids International Fellowship – A Church of the Nazarene (CN), Grand Rapids, Michigan

1991 – 98, Georgetown CN, Georgetown, TX; 1985-91, North Seattle CN, Seattle, Washington; 1983 – 85, Bel Air CN, Wichita, KS; 1977 – 83, Beaverton CN, Beaverton, OR; 1975-77, College Church CN, Singles and Visiting Pastor, Olathe, KS

PARTIAL LIST OF LITERARY WORKS

"Hope Against Hope: Christianity & World Religions—Hindu, Buddhism and Islam," unpublished Th.M. thesis, CTS, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000.

"Prevenient & Common Grace — A Wesleyan's Point of View," *Stromata*, Calvin Theological Seminary community, 2000.

"Meritorious Reconsidered: Reflections, Red Flags and Resolution" – unpublished submission on Article 6, the doctrine of the atonement, Church of the Nazarene, 2010.

TEACHING ASSIGNMENTS

Conferences on World Religions and the Gospel – Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, India, Singapore, Cyprus, Netherlands and Senegal in addition to a variety of American settings.

"Islamic Challenge and Hope," Theology Conference, Mid-America Nazarene University, Olathe, KS, 2003.

"Engaging Islam, Embracing Muslims," Masters course, Olivet Nazarene University School of Theology, Bourbonnais, IL, 2010 and 2011.

World Religions course, European Nazarene College, Busingen, Germany, 2007.